

SEPTEMBER/
OCTOBER
2025

MONTH/MONTH 2024

ANIMATION MAGAZINE

MEET THE MESOAMERICAN DARK KNIGHT:
**AZTEC BATMAN:
CLASH OF EMPIRES**

+

Studio 4°C's ChaO

Haunted Hotel

Eyes of Wakanda

Women Wearing Shoulder Pads

EVENTS

Pixelatl

OIAF

Cartoon Forum

MIPJunior

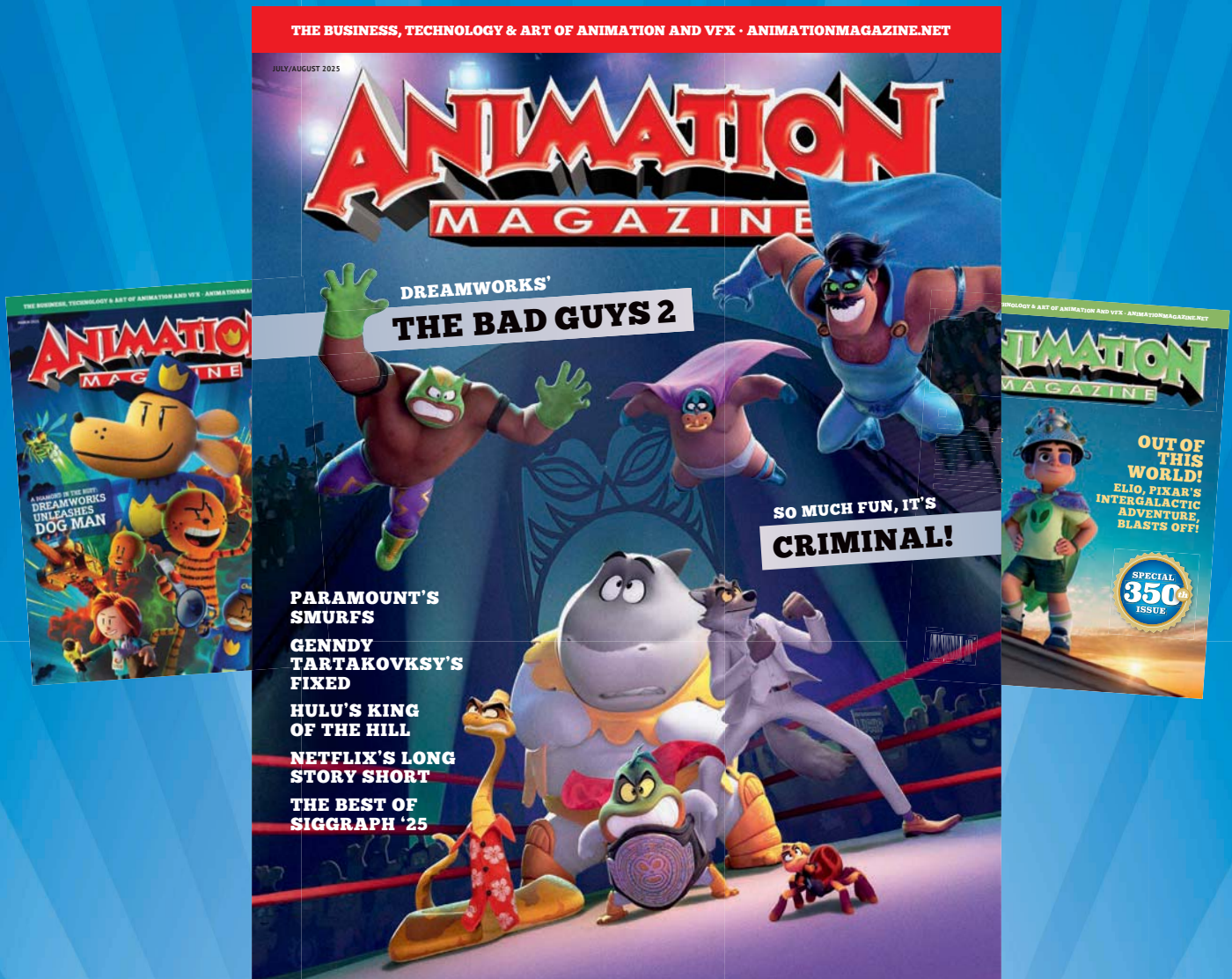
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ANIMATION MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025

VOLUME 39, ISSUE 7, NUMBER 352



animationmagazine.net



Women Wearing Shoulder Pads



ELLE(S)



Anne Shirley

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EDITORIAL COVER: The new *Aztec Batman: Clash of Empires* is produced by Ánima, Warner Bros. Animation and Chatrone and directed by Juan Meza-León.

MIP/JUNIOR/ CARTOON FORUM/ BRAND LICENSING EXPO COVERS: Cottonwood Media brings its new animated series *20 Dance Street* to the fall content markets.

L.A. COMIC CON COVER: *Charlie the Wonderdog* (ICON Creative Studio)



A Harvest of Original Fare



A friend who works in the exhibition business used to compare late summer-early fall in movie theaters to the final hour of a very long, noisy party. After all the big family studio features have wrapped up their summer runs, the grown-ups get to chill a little bit with indie releases and smaller international art movies. This year is not different, and we are very happy to spotlight two of those indie sleepers in this issue.

The first is *ChaO*, Studio 4°C's wild, action-packed tale of a love between a mermaid and a regular working man in a future-world Shanghai, directed by Yasuhiro Aoki (*Batman: Gotham Knight*). The imaginative feature was a big hit at Annecy this past June, and will be released by GKIDS in early 2026. So, we were lucky to nab an early interview with the talented director in this issue. The other big international title of the year is *Olivia and the Invisible Earthquake*, a thought-provoking stop-motion feature about a young girl whose life turns upside down when her family is evicted from their home. The films' talented helmer Irene Iborra Rizo answered a few

of our questions in advance of the screening of her film in competition at the Ottawa Intl. Animation Festival in late September.

Another heavily anticipated animated project this month is *Aztec Batman: Clash of Empires*. Ever since this Warner Bros. Animation-Anima-Chatrone project was announced a few years ago, fans have had high hopes for this Mesoamerican take on the DC superhero. Our regular contributor Jeff Spry had a nice interview with the film's director, Juan Meza-León, and I think you will enjoy his insights into this highly imaginative project.

Just as school-age children have back-to-school sales to remind them of the new season, animation fans have the arrival of fall's animation festivals and markets. In this issue, we have the scoop on three of the season's big events — Pixelatl



Festival (Guadalajara, Mexico), Cartoon Forum (Bordeaux, France), the Ottawa Intl. Animation Festival (Canada) and MIPJunior (Cannes, France). Judging from the wealth and diversity of animated features, TV shows and shorts featured at this event, there is no shortage of talent and top-quality content out there. Now, if we could only get the big streamers, studios and multi-nationals to stand behind the indie gems and

bold, original fare, we wouldn't have to worry so much about the future.

Ramin Zahed
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ANIMATION MAGAZINE™

September/October 2025
Vol.39, Issue 7, No.352
info@animationmagazine.net

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ANIMATION MAGAZINE

(USPS 015-877/ISSN 1041-617X)
Published monthly except for combined issues of May/June, July/August and September/October, by *Animation Magazine*, 24943 Kit Carson Road Calabasas, CA 91302. Periodicals postage paid at Woodland Hills Post Office CA, and additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: send address changes to mailing address: *Animation Magazine*, 26500 W. Agoura Rd. Ste. 102-651 Calabasas, CA 91302

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QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“[Paramount executives] were like, ‘We’re gonna blur the penis,’ and we’re like, ‘No, you’re not gonna blur the penis. If we put eyes on the penis, we won’t blur it.’ That was a whole conversation with grown up people for four f***** days! It’s a character!”

Matt Stone and Trey Parker discussing their *South Park* Season 27 opener, which featured Donald Trump and Satan in bed.

MONSTER SHAKER

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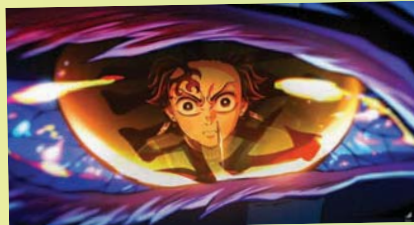




Animation Planner: September 2025



LEGO Star Wars: Rebuild the Galaxy - Pieces of the Past



Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba Infinity Castle



Toy Story



Howl's Moving Castle



Haunted Hotel



Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie

SEPTEMBER

9

Guadalajara hosts animation, games & comics luminaries from across Latin America and the globe during **Pixelatl Festival**. pixelatl.com

12

Celebrate the 30th anniversary of **Toy Story** as the film that launched the Pixar empire returns to the big screen.

Anime fans won't want to miss **Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba Infinity Castle**, only in IMAX.

15

Commissioners and broadcasters can sample the European TV animation landscape at **Cartoon Forum** in Toulouse. cartoon-media.eu/forum

19

Netflix welcomes guests to the new adult animated comedy **Haunted Hotel** today, while younger viewers can catch **LEGO Star Wars: Rebuild the Galaxy - Pieces of the Past** on Disney+.

20

Studio Ghibli Fest presents the Hayao Miyazaki favorite **Howl's Moving Castle** for four days only, through Fathom Events.

24

Ottawa Int'l Animation Festival continues its reign as North America's largest and longest-running celebration of indie toons over four days. animationfestival.ca

26

DreamWorks Animation's **Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie** brings the beloved hybrid series to cinemas, starring Laila Lockhart Kraner, Kristen Wiig, Gloria Esefan, Ego Nwodim and more!

L.A. Comic Con buzzes with pop culture fan energy all weekend long. comicconla.com



To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please email edit@animationmagazine.net

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Animadeba

Deba, Spain
animadeba.com

Animafilm

Baku, Azerbaijan
anima.az

Animasyros

Syros, Greece
animasyros.gr

Animaze

Montreal, QC
animazefestival.com

Chaniartoon

Chania, Greece
chaniartoonfest.gr

Encounters Film Festival

Bristol, U.K.
encounters.film

Fantoche

Baden, Switzerland
fantoche.ch

Festival of Animation Berlin

Berlin, Germany
fa-berlin.com

Kilkenny Animated

Kilkenny, Ireland
kilkennyanimated.com

Kotatsu Festival

Cardiff, U.K.
kotatsufestival.com

Nikozi International Festival of Animated Film

Nikozi, Georgia
nikozifestival.ge

Rising of Lusitania

Łódź, Poland
animadocff.wixsite.com/animadoc

Seoul Indie AniFest

Seoul, S. Korea
ianifest.org

SiamANIMA

Salaya, Thailand
siamanima.com

StopTriK

Maribor, Slovenia
stoptrik.com

TAASCE

Dartford, U.K.
awanetwork.cc

Viborg Animation Festival

Viborg, Denmark
animationsfestival.dk

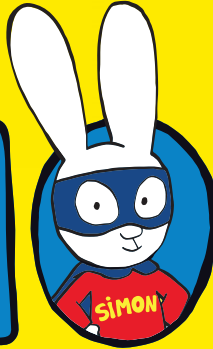
WEIRD

Valencia, Spain
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The Must-Have List

By Mercedes Milligan



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Dark Horse / \$110 SRP

The Art of Smurfs

Get a Smurf's-eye view of Peyo's magical world in this full-color hardcover, packed with concept and production artwork from the blue dudes' latest big screen adventure. Fans can flip through page-by-page tours of Smurf Village, Smurfberry Glade, Gargamel's Evil Workshop and new locations featured in the film, and catch up with the latest versions of Smurfette, Papa Smurf, Gargamel and the whole Smurfin' lot. Penned by super Smurfs expert Matt Murray.

IDW / \$40

Adventure Time: The Bubble College Special #1

Eisner Award-winning cartoonist Caroline Cash helms a double-sized alternative universe comic spin off, which provides a meet-cute at Ooo University for stressed out over-achiever Princess Bubblegum and super cool, super mysterious vampire Marceline. The delightful romance's first volume features covers by Cash, Robyn Smith and Chloé Stawski.

Oni Press / \$8 / Aug. 20



MERCH



New KPop Kids on the Block!

Practice your extravagant stage choreography along to the chart-topping songs from the hit Netflix/Sony animated feature with the official **KPop Demon Hunters soundtrack LP** on vinyl — including the No. 1 song in the world, "Golden" by HUNTRX/S; the hot tunes by their demonic boy band rivals, Saja Boys; and tracks by the likes of TWICE, MeloMance and Joker, as well as Score Suite by Marcelo Zarvos. Includes fold-out poster and photo card (1 of 4 versions).

Republic Records / \$30 / Ships Oct. 13

DISCS

Lilo & Stitch

Disney's billion-dollar hit comes home packed with extras: deleted scenes, bloopers, *Scenes with Stitch*, *Drawn to Life* animated original comparison and making-of featurette.

Disney / Digital, DVD, Blu-ray, 4K UHD / Aug. 26

Mid-Century Modern Animation Vol. 3

Commercials, entertainment and industrial films produced in the '40s, '50s and early '60s, all restored from rare original 35mm and 16mm film prints!

Thunderbean / \$19 BR

The Tragedy of Man

Hungarian animator Marcell Jankovics' kaleidoscopic epic follows the eternal battle between Adam, Eve and Lucifer through history. Includes new video essay, commentary and video interviews.

Deaf Crocodile / \$30 BR

Wolf Children

Mamoru Hosoda's heart-wrenching modern fairytale gets a new treatment with bonus director's interview, world premiere footage, Hana's Day Appreciation and more.

GKIDS / \$27 BR, \$37 LE SteelBook 4K





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FEATURES



FISH OUT OF WATER

ChaO director Yasuhiro Aoki takes us inside Studio 4°C's acclaimed movie about the relationship between a regular man and a mermaid princess in a futuristic Shanghai.

By Blake Simons

Yasuhiro Aoki wants to challenge himself. A veteran animator currently at Tokyo-based Studio 4°C, he previously co-directed *Batman: Gotham Knight* and contributed animation to *Psycho-Pass: The Movie* — atmospheric and moody features that worked with shadows and darkness. Aoki has swum against that tide for his latest feature, the Annecy-premiered *ChaO*, which ushers in bright colors and kinetic visuals. “When I embark on a new project, I like to do something that is the complete opposite of what I did previously,” Aoki explains.

ChaO is Aoki’s debut solo directorial effort, and helming the film brought new experiences and hurdles to overcome. “Making a feature is a long process, so there’s an element of endurance,” reflects Aoki. “Luckily, the tension and excitement in that didn’t dissipate, and I felt invested throughout.”

Responsible for some of Japan’s most idiosyncratic and internationally minded animated features — such as *Mind Game* and *Tekkonkinkreet* — Studio 4°C has long been synonymous with innovation and thinking outside of the box. Its name derives from the temperature at which water is most dense — so perhaps an aquatic escapade was an inevitability.

Interspecies Romance

ChaO tells the tale of Stephan, a down-on-his-luck inventor living in a fantastical future Shanghai — where diverse species beyond just humans walk

alongside one another. Swept underwater one day by a giant wave, he wakes in a hospital bed to find those around him talking of love and marriage. His savior from a watery demise is Chao, the mermaid princess. Thanks to a purported romantic confession, Stephan and Chao are betrothed to be married — despite the fact that Stephan can’t recall having uttered a word to her or even having made her acquaintance.

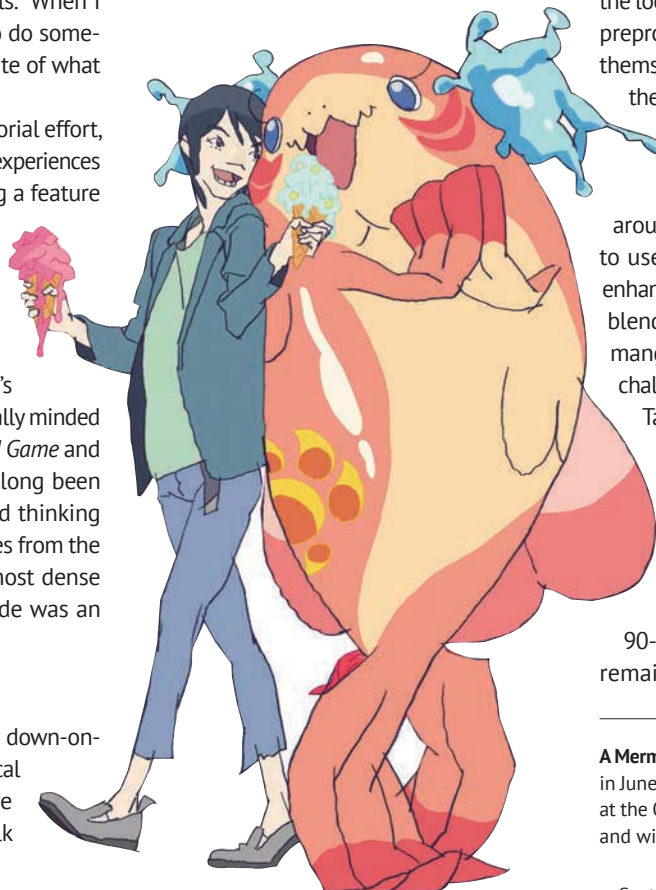
The film’s Shanghai setting sets *ChaO* apart

from its anime stablemates. “I think the way we approach a film’s setting at Studio 4°C is very unique to us,” suggests Aoki. “It’s not so much about the specific place but about the perspective within it. For example, a corner of the town, or atop the electric lines that hang above the city. It’s a way for us to show something different, from a unique angle.”

Shanghai’s atmosphere is a far cry from the domestically all-too-recognizable Tokyo, and that difference attracted Studio 4°C to pursue the locale. The team went to Shanghai during preproduction to location scout, only to find themselves overwhelmed by the busy feel of the city. “There was so much going on, and we really took that in,” says Aoki. “We had these mismatched characters

that we had to build a coherent world around, so it was about working out how to use Shanghai’s busyness and clutter to enhance that.” The aesthetic result is a unique blend. “We wanted to capture a mixture of manga and fantasy,” explains Aoki. “It was challenging for [character designer] Hiroshi Takiguchi (*Weathering With You*, *The Case of Hana & Alice*) to create something that at first glance doesn’t cohere but doesn’t feel strange or uncomfortable.”

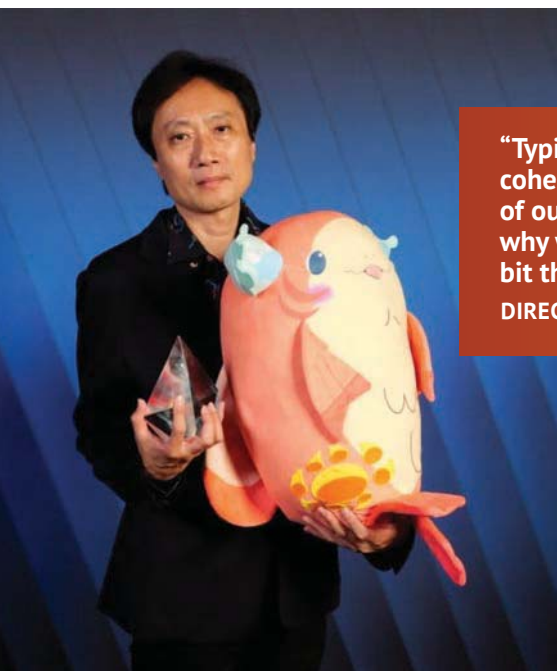
Chao herself is a particularly fascinating figure, her form morphing and shifting throughout the film’s 90-minute runtime. “Usually, the mermaid remains in one form from start to finish,”



A Mermaid Tail: After impressing audiences at Annecy in June, *ChaO* will be one of the features competing at the Ottawa Intl. Animation Festival in September and will be released by GKIDS later this year.



reflects Aoki. “I wanted to attempt a character that deforms and reforms into a different thing.” It’s a device that Aoki and his team have thought very deeply about. “Transitioning can be very vulnerable,” Aoki says. “In this case, the character transitions from this big, anime-like character into a scrawny girl, and vice versa. The transition itself is not quite grotesque, but it’s uncomfortable and vulnerable.”



“Typically, in anime, there’s a coherence to the world. We went out of our way to avoid that — which is why we created characters that are a bit thin or have rounder bodies.”

DIRECTOR YASUHIRO AOKI

that diversity and variety is what makes this world so beautiful.”

A standout sequence comes at the film’s midpoint, when Chao dances in the water fountain at the heart of the city. “I enjoy incorporating an element that is pure entertainment,” remarks Aoki. “It’s both a transition between Act 1 and 2, and a transition in Chao as she grows into her own skin. I wanted to show the beauty and confidence in that.”

This fluidity extends to the progression of the film at large, and *ChaO* is beguiling

in its lack of breaks. “There’s something in finding a mutual ground between one scene and the next,” explains Aoki. “Whether that’s mirroring a character’s gesture or movement in the subsequent scene or a sound staying in a certain key, it’s about providing a point of contact from one scene to the next — such that you have a chain of transitions that connect.”

Fish-out-of-water tales have a storied history in anime, with many works having taken direct inspiration from films like *The Little Mermaid*, Hayao Miyazaki’s *Ponyo* and Masaaki Yuasa’s *Lu Over the Wall*. Aoki feels that the universality of trying to communicate across barriers is what makes this tradition endure. “There’s a beauty in someone who doesn’t understand your language trying to communicate with you, and vice versa,” says Aoki. “There’s a nicety and friendliness that is drawn out of a person when they’re trying hard to bridge that. It’s a funny thing — when

you don’t have the means to communicate, the best version of yourself comes out.

And there’s a relief and joy when you finally understand each other after having this back-and-forth.” *ChaO* carries many of the same hallmarks of Studio 4°C’s previous works. We’re introduced to a lively cityscape in motion, much like in *Tekkonkinkreet*, and our hero is a scrawny underdog with an angular and elastic outline.

“We’re conscious that there are things that only this studio can do,” says Aoki. “But, of course, when producing a new film, we want something fresh about it. It’s about juggling the two — putting things in and taking other things out — adjusting elements to make something new whilst honoring the uniqueness of what the studio can offer.”

Hand-Drawn Magic

As with many major anime production houses in Japan, Studio 4°C is changing with the times in the methods and visuals it employs. “About 70% of the film is hand-drawn,” says Aoki. “But there’s something that the audience enjoys about CG, and I want to allow ourselves to enjoy working with CG. The car chase sequence, for example, was made entirely with CG.”

The backgrounds are strikingly hand-drawn — beautiful in their texture and watercolor palette. “I’m not the sort of person who’s too focused on backgrounds,” says Aoki. “There’s more detail poured into the car chase — it’s these elements that I like to accentuate more. Other studios like to employ CG for the backgrounds. We keep them hand-drawn and slot them in.”

A line of dialog stands out, as the film’s hero commands a goon harassing his fiancée to “watch movies that make you nicer!” “That line wasn’t in the original scenario, and it just kind of came to me as we made the film,” reflects Aoki. “It came from the heart. I think all films are made with that goal.”

ChaO is an ode to love that could only be conveyed through animation. “With animation, drawing doesn’t happen without someone doing so,” says Aoki. “There’s a power in drawing a line, and that becomes a picture, then an animation — and that requires a lot of passion and thought. When it all comes together — drawing, sound, voice — there is so much heart to it. Live action is easier to assemble, but with animation there’s a process to it. Without someone holding a pen and drawing that line and creating, it wouldn’t have happened. I think animation is a vital tool in telling stories of love, because it starts from one person’s love of drawing.” ■

***ChaO* will be released by GKIDS in U.S. theaters early next year.**

With thanks to Juna Shai for interpreting.

Stephan and Chao stand out in the crowd, but passersby are equally worthy of attention — an enthralling menagerie of creatures cute and colorful. “I like to vary the specifics of characters’ faces, and we took a telephoto lens approach to the environments,” says Aoki. “With that in mind, I don’t really worry about exposition. I’d rather drop the audience into the world and allow them to immerse themselves and explore. It’s a challenge for the viewer.”

These characters come in all shapes and sizes — to fascinating effect when placed together. “Typically, in anime, there’s a coherence to the world,” says Aoki. “We went out of our way to avoid that — which is why we created characters that are a bit thin or have rounder bodies. The film is about coexisting. I hope that the audience sees



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Paramount Animation



Director Ryan Crego and head of character animation CJ Sarachene on why DreamWorks' *Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie* is the cat's meow.

PROWLING THE STREETS OF CAT FRANCISCO

By Ramin Zahed

If you share your home with a preschooler, then you probably know all about a very popular girl named Gabby, her magical dollhouse and her nine delightful cats. The brainchild of *Blue's Clues* creators Traci Paige Johnson and Jennifer Twomey, the interactive show *Gabby's Dollhouse* has been a huge success for Netflix since its first meow in January of 2021.

This fall, *Gabby's Dollhouse* expands its kitty empire to movie theaters with a big live-action/animation hybrid feature directed by Ryan

Crego (*Arlo the Alligator Boy*, *Home: Adventures with Tip & Oh*, *Sanjay and Craig*). The colorful new movie finds Gabby (Laila Lockhart Kraner) and her grandmother (Gloria Estefan) on a road trip to the city of Cat Francisco, where their magical dollhouse is nabbed by an eccentric cat lady (Kristen Wiig). The resourceful young girl has to come up with a plan to get her Gabby Cats all back together before it's too late and the furballs hit the fan.

A Family Favorite

Crego, who began work on the movie about two and half years ago, says he was initially

drawn to the project because his young daughter was a big fan of the original show. "I thought, wow, it would be so cool if I could turn my daughter's favorite show into a fun movie," he says. "Because they were asking me to be involved it meant that they were looking at making some tweaks, because I'm not a preschool person. I started out working on the *Shrek* movies at the studio, so my background is in comedy."

He says his goal was to keep the integrity of the show while expanding its audience. "In addition to my daughter, my younger son, who is three now, became a fan of the show over the course of the movie's production," Crego points out. "So, I had my own little test audience at home, and I could see which characters they loved and how they reacted to them. I wanted to make sure the movie stayed honest and pure to all the show's characters."

The director also emphasizes that he wanted to make the project expansive and challenging enough for the big screen. "The story had to be emotionally gratifying," he explains. "It had to be something that the parents would want to see in the theater, because I see myself as the target audience: I'm that parent who's going to take my kids to the movie. So, we set out to make a comedy that put Gabby and these characters in scenarios that are too

"We wanted the story to be expansive and challenging enough for the big screen as well as emotionally gratifying. It had to be something that the parents would want to see in the theater along with their kids."

WRITER-DIRECTOR RYAN CREGO





Furball Fantasy: Gabby (Laila Lockhart Kraner) and her grandmother (Gloria Estefan) have to save the Gabby Cats from the claws of a crazy cat lady (Kristin Wiig) in *Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie*.

and Assemblage (India) were in charge of animation for VFX, while rendering and compositing were done at FX3X (Macedonia). The live-action portions were handled by Catchlight in Los Angeles and Vancouver.

Retaining the integrity of the show's character design and shape language was also high on the creative team's priority list. "We also needed to make sure that these animated characters could live in the real world," says Crego. "So, that meant special attention had to be paid to the textures and surfacing and the way their eyes were going to be reflective. These characters have wonderful surfaces on them: For example, Mercat



Laila Lockhart Kraner (right) stars as Gabby in the new live-action/hybrid feature film.



big for them, and we made them funny, crazy and exciting. The third act is a wild set piece in a world of giant gummy worms, crashing through a candy strip river and riding on donuts. It's a big action scene, but it's done in a very playful, imaginative way. Overall, the goal was to make something that would work for the core audience as well as something that the parents would also enjoy, as well as the older siblings who would like to see the continuation of Gabby's story."

Just like the show, the movie blends live-action footage with animated characters and sequences. According to the studio, around 51% of the movie was fully animated, 27% was hybrid (including VFX animation) and 21% was live action (mostly shot in Vancouver). The bulk of the animation was handled by CGCG studio in Taiwan, which also helps with the animation for the TV series. Cinesite (Montreal)

gets this great luminescent subsurface glow. We wanted to make sure there's something tangible and textural in each one of them, so we could bring them in and out of their animated dollhouse world. And then, they come out and will be running around in the city — they needed to look like they belonged there and not look like cartoon stickers. Our head of character animation CJ Sarachene really upped the ante and brought so much life to these characters. She added so much acting and beauty to these simple designs."

Sarachene, whose many impressive credits include *HOP*, *Yogi Bear* and *Star Trek: Prodigy*, says when the characters are seen in their dollhouse, the animation is pushed a little bit. "We wanted to make sure the characters felt like they were the same ones in and out of their dollhouse," she notes. "A big part of that is their miniature size. We wanted to make

the audience feel like they could reach out and grab these little dolls and play with them. At the same time, we wanted to keep the animation simple to harken back to what the TV show is. We had to keep that fine balance and not overcomplicate the emotions. The series gave us such a wealth of characters and back stories, so we just went with that. We also had a really good time with the new characters and had a lot of fun with the magic of play and bringing them to life."

Interactive Kitty Fun

Another distinctive quality of the movie is its interactive element, where the audience is invited to participate in the fun. "I think of it as a great Disneyland ride, where you take your families and everyone can experience the fun of being inside the story," says Crego. "You're not just being presented this story, you're actually involved in it. Many of these elements like the dancing or clapping are ingrained in the show. Gabby talks to the camera, so it felt pretty natural for us. I tried to key in on things like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, where the mood is fun and cheeky. You want everyone to participate, just like when the audience in the *Peter Pan* theater show claps to show that they believe in fairies [to help Tinker Bell fly]."

Crego says his most important audience — his two children — have already seen an early version of the film (with rough animation), and really loved it. He adds, "I've seen the movie with family audiences three times now, and I wish I could see like that every time I watch it, because that's where you really get to experience the magic of what's happening on the screen. You get to watch kids engage and their parents engage with them. It's the kind of silliness and fun which leads to everyone walking out of the theater with huge smiles on their faces. That's the biggest reward for me. You only have a handful of years when you can share experiences like this — your kids' first movies — with them. It's such a special time, full of innocence and such joy, and that's what's really valuable." ■

DreamWorks' *Gabby's Dollhouse: The Movie* will purr its way into audiences' hearts on September 26.



WILDLIFE PROTECTION

Writer-director Daniel Chong offers us a sneak peek at his eagerly anticipated 2026 Pixar feature, *Hoppers*.

There has been a high level of excitement about Pixar's March 2026 movie *Hoppers* since June when Disney revealed some footage of the **Daniel Chong**-directed movie at Annecy. The charming new pic follows the adventures of a young girl named Mabel (voiced by Piper Curda) who uses a new "Hopper" technology to "become" a beaver and save animals under the threat from a greedy mayor (voiced by Jon Hamm) and his monstrous highway construction plan. As Pixar CCO Pete Docter explained at Annecy, "What happens next is a little like *Avatar* meets *Mission: Impossible* meets *Planet Earth*."

We recently had the chance to have a quick chat with the film's co-writer and director, who is best known for creating and exec producing Cartoon Network's hugely popular series *We Bare Bears* and its

spinoff *We Baby Bears*, as well as working as a storyboard artist on a wide variety of projects including *Bolt*, *Cars 2*, *The Lorax*, *Toy Story of Terror* and *Toy Story That Time Forgot*. Here's what the Emmy-nominated and Annie-winning director told us:

First of all, congrats on almost seeing the finish line. How does it feel to be working on Pixar's 30th feature? Do you feel a lot of pressure?

Daniel Chong: We finished animation a couple weeks ago, so that's really an indication that you're wrapping it up soon. It's been a five-year-plus, non-stop journey to make this movie, so to see the light at the end of the tunnel is a bit surreal. You also feel a little bit of loss, too, because you love the team and connect with them, and you might not work with them for a while, so

there's a feeling of bittersweet melancholy.

Everything is on a much bigger scale. There are a lot of similarities as you are still making an animated project with other people, and you're still iterating and shifting, but *Bears* was definitely a smaller project. One of the nice things about doing *We Bare Bears* was that we were creating so much volume for a TV show, and that really trained me to come to Pixar and bring a lot of that energy to this process. It still requires a lot of the same kind of energy because we rewrite, reread and retell the same story over and over again to find the right version of it. It becomes a bit of an existential sort of conundrum in your brain. You ask yourself,

Animal Attraction: A young girl tries to save the natural world from a terrible highway project in Pixar's 2026 movie, *Hoppers*.



"Oh my God, are we still solving the same problem three years later?"

Both the premise and the execution of this movie seem like a lot of fun. What did you love about this script — other than you have a lot of experience with animating cuddly, fuzzy mammals?

I mean, yes, that's my bag; it's what I love. But there was also an opportunity that I saw here not to just tell an epic and really big story, but also to throw in a lot of things into a movie that might not fit together at first, but somehow could become a movie. I think that's kind of part of the fun of telling this really funny, broad comedy — but on top of that, it has some *Avatar* qualities which you can see in the trailer, and there's also a *Mission: Impossible* spy thriller aspect to it. The idea of getting a movie into a theater for an audience to watch that could feel like a roller coaster ride has been one of the most fun challenges. With *We Bare Bears*, audiences would just watch it alone at home, and don't get to experience it with a big audience. We've shown the movie a couple of times in its early stages to audiences, and you know it's a ride for people. You can just feel united with the audience as you go on this journey. That to me is unbeatable.

I think there is an unpredictable quality to the movie. I think it's also the surprise element that you don't expect these cute characters to be thrust into a crazy movie type of situation. Today's audiences have seen it all, and they're looking for something new. I think hopefully our movie will deliver on those things and give them something they've never seen before.

Can you talk a bit about the visual style of the movie?

I think stylistically one of the big things that we stylized in the movie was the fur, and that was no small feat. We wanted to get the fur to look aesthetically cute and believable, but also stylized so that it's not quite fur, but has a little more of a felty feeling. That was a big choice. It influenced how the nature scenes look and how the other characters look next to them, so that was a stylistic choice that we made. I did want to make sure that you could really feel that



DANIEL CHONG



tangible quality. I wanted the audience to be able to reach out and grab those characters and hug them and feel all the fat folds coming out!

Our technical team did some incredible things with the backgrounds which might not even be really clear to the audience. One of the things about depicting nature is that it's very busy and there's always a lot of information: When you take a photo outside in nature, it's just like there's no order, and it's just chaos. There's so much busyness! I think one of the things that our technical team did was create this new brush tool that could kind of go on top of the backgrounds and kind of simplify things. It really stylized them almost to an impressionistic place when you didn't want to get distracted because of certain things. So, it created this totally different kind of aesthetic that audiences will really feel comforted by looking at.

What is your take on the state of animation in 2025? It seems that there's so much unreasonable expectation for animated

movies these days.

It's a kind of interesting point in animation history, and I've been in the industry for over 20 years now, I've seen a lot of things come and go, and I will say one of the more exciting things about animation right now is the audience's openness to different things. I think their desire for both different looks and different kinds of stories is very exciting. The fact that different kinds of movies have started to come out and surprising new things are becoming big is the most promising [indicator of the animation industry]. Yes, I think there are a lot of things to be pessimistic about, and that's a very easy place to be, but as a person who works in animation, I have to be optimistic that we'll find ways to keep surprising the audience and give them things that they've never seen before. Now, that's both the exciting part and the big challenge. ■

Disney will release Pixar's *Hoppers* in theaters on March 6, 2026. Directed by Daniel Chong, *Hoppers* is produced by Nicole Paradis Grindle and features the voices of Piper Curda (Mabel), Jon Hamm (Mayor Jerry) and Bobby Moynihan (King George the Beaver).



PUPPETRY FROM THE HEART

By Ramin Zahed

Spanish director **Irene Iborra Rizo**'s new stop-motion feature *Olivia and the Invisible Earthquake* was nominated for the Best Animated Feature Cristal prize at Annecy in June and received great reviews. The film, which is also competing at the Ottawa Intl. Animation Festival in September, offers a powerful portrait of a family dealing with harrowing real-world issues such as poverty, housing insecurity and depression. The titular heroine of the movie protects her little brother from the

sad truth of their lives by convincing him that everything they're experiencing is part of an elaborate film shoot.

Iborra Rizo, who is best known for her previous animated shorts such as *Click*, and has the distinction of directing Catalonia's first stop-motion feature, was kind enough to answer a few of our questions about her imaginative and powerful movie:

Can you tell us a bit about how this project started? When did you begin work on the movie and how long did it take?

Irene Iborra Rizo: This project has its origin

Director Irene Iborra Rizo answers a few of our questions about her acclaimed new movie *Olivia and the Invisible Earthquakes*, which competes at the Ottawa Festival in September.

in a novel written by Maite Carranza, a well-known Spanish author: *The Film of Our Lives*. When I read the novel, I was deeply moved, partly because it resonated strongly with parts of my own life and partly because Maite managed to tackle very complicated subjects from the children's point of view with great tenderness and clarity. So, I felt the need to tell the story in the form of a film, as a very powerful tool to destigmatize child poverty and be able to talk about it with children without overdramatizing it. We began writing the adaptation with Maite Carranza and Júlia Prats in 2018, and we finished the film in 2025 ... so, it took a lot of time!

What were some of your inspirations for the style of movie?

My Life as a Zucchini, directed by Claude Barras, was my very first inspiration for the film. Because when I watched it, I thought, "OK, it's possible to make a good feature in stop motion in Europe. Let's go." In fact,



Barras' film and mine have a lot in common: not easy subjects, children who find love in unexpected places, colorful sets and puppets and even some people from the crew: Morgan Navarro, César Díaz, Tim Allen.

Was it difficult to balance such sensitive topics as home insecurity and depression in a family movie?

Yes, it wasn't easy at all. Already in the script, as writers, we were aware that we needed to explain this very carefully, in a very delicate way and always finding the limit to not fall into big drama. Our intention was to show that there is always a seed of light in the middle of darkness. And at the same time, the colorful and positive "mise-en-scène" balances these shadows. Besides, sensitive topics are part of the world we live in. And to keep children in a bubble, pretending everything is always bright, I feel it's not fair for them. This is why I think it's healthier to make them understand that life is wonderful with all, lights and shadows, and that we have the power to decide how to navigate it.



How many sets were created for the movie, and how big were the puppets?

Five sets were built for the movie, and



the puppets' size was around 20 centimeters (7.9 inches). It's a big production effort and very ambitious to be the first stop-motion movie

in Catalonia. It has been a huge challenge!

What do you love about working in the stop-motion world?

There are so many reasons: I love handcrafted

work, and handcrafted cinema is only possible with stop motion. I love to work with different textures too, because they appeal to our sense of touch. Besides, stop motion allows [me] to explain stories through materials and from my point of view; it gives kind of a freedom and the feeling that [something] unexpected can arrive in any moment ... I enjoy it a lot. In the film, we have used different textures – wool hair, real tissue – and it gives a particular delicacy in the





form that joins very well [with] the content of the story. In addition, stop-motion with puppets allows a “safety distance” to explain this hard story to children. Puppets work as a particular mirror to us, in a way that we can identify with characters but not merge with them.

Can you discuss the importance of having that strong sense of place (Barcelona, Catalonia) in your movie?

For me, the film is my particular “love letter”

same time, the movie tells a story that can be located anywhere in the world, because it's a story linked to capitalism and, sadly, it doesn't happen only in Catalonia or Spain.

Have you been struck by the audiences' responses to your movie?

Yes, a lot! I was overwhelmed by the warm feedback of the audience in the premiere in Annecy. I couldn't imagine that the film could touch the hearts of so many people ... some of them approached me to thank

Caroline Leaf, Hermína Týrlová ... and the list keeps going.

What is your take on the state of animation worldwide?

I confess that during the production of the film I was pretty disconnected of what was happening outside, but the feeling that there is a lot going on, it's cool ... and at the same time, in my opinion, it's not so easy to find animation cinema with soul.

What do you hope audiences will take away from your movie?

Lots of things! For example: the way we look ourselves, the perception that we have of ourselves and others, can change our lives. I would like to share the idea that our internal dialog is very important because it can save us ... or drag us down. I would also like to convey to them that life is wonderful in its contradictions, even if it doesn't make us happy every day. And above all, that together we can change things, and that we all have a superpower: the power to choose how we react to what happens to us! ■

“I would like to share the idea that our internal dialog is very important because it can save us ... or drag us down. I would also like to convey to the audience that life is wonderful in its contradictions, even if it doesn't make us happy every day.”

DIRECTOR IRENE IBORRA



to the “other” Barcelona, the one that we don't see in the tourist tours. The one where we find communities who care about others and fight together for their rights, no matter where you are from.

And this other Barcelona is reflected in the film through the architecture and Topography of the peripheric neighborhoods that are directly related to the purchasing power of the people who live there. At the

me with happy tears in their eyes. I'm very grateful for connecting with audiences in this way. The huge effort of making the film and all the struggles are finally worth it. Someone told me that the film feels like a big loving hug. After hearing that, as you can imagine, I was floating with happiness.

Who are your biggest animation influences?

Jan Švankmajer, Garri Bardin, Hayao Miyazaki,

***Olivia and the Invisible Earthquake* will screen in competition at OIAF in September. It is produced by Cornelius Films, Bigaro Films, Citoplasmas Stop Motion, Vivement Lundi!, Panique! Production, Nadasdy and Pájaro. Learn more at citoplasmas.com.**





Super Pooch to the Rescue!

ICON's upcoming animated feature *Charlie the Wonderdog* is a diamond in the ruff.

Watch out, Krypto! There's a new super canine in town. Next year Canada's largest independent CG company, ICON Creative Studio (*Monsters at Work*, *Disney's Ariel*, *WondLa*) will introduce Charlie the Wonderdog, the star of its new movie to the world.



Carson Loveday

The film, which will be released in March 2026, in the U.S, Canada, and 30-plus other countries, follows a young boy and his dog Charlie (voiced by Owen Wilson), who gains superpowers after an alien abduction. It's directed by Shea Wageman, with a script by Wageman and Steve Ball. **Carson Loveday**, VP of ICON Creative Studio, who also produces the movie, gave us an early peek at his fun family movie:

The movie looks like a lot of fun. Can you tell us a bit about the beginnings and inspiration for your movie?

Carson Loveday: We've always loved superhero movies, but we felt it was would be unique and powerful if the hero was an aging 'man's best friend' (a dog close to the end). Everyone who owns a pet knows the day will come when you have to say goodbye, and *what if*... something wonderful happened before that time came, which prolonged your adventure with your special four legged pal.

Shea Wageman is writing and directing the movie, and Geoff Taylor is the production designer. Owen Wilson is the voice of Charlie Wonderdog, with Dawson Littman as his nine-year old owner. Danny. The voice of the villain cat Puddy is being played by Ruairi MacDonald.

What do you love about this movie?

Following many superhero films we setup the good guys and the bad guys, having received their powers by visitors from outer space. The film dives deep into the emotion of friendship and family, really exploring the connection between the main characters — Danny and Charlie on the good side and the neighbors Otis and his diabolical cat — Puddy and the bad side. We show the deep connection between Danny and Charlie, and what amazing friends and family will do for each other in times of need. In our view what will make this movie stand out

is it's not a superhero story, but it's one of friendship and believing in each other.

Can you tell us a bit about the animation production and the overall visuals?

The film is entirely CG animation produced at ICON Creative Studio Vancouver. The budget was roughly \$20 million CAD. *Charlie the Wonderdog* is meant to compete with the highest levels of animated feature films, and was completed within ICON Creative new CGI pipeline which was designed specifically to produce competitive, Hollywood-level features, on moderate budgets which can monetize with today's audiences and within today's marketplace.

What do you hope audiences will take away from the film?

We hope audiences will want a sequel! having felt the connection between the main characters and the amazing fun ride the movie takes you on! ■

For more info, visit iconcreativestudio.com.





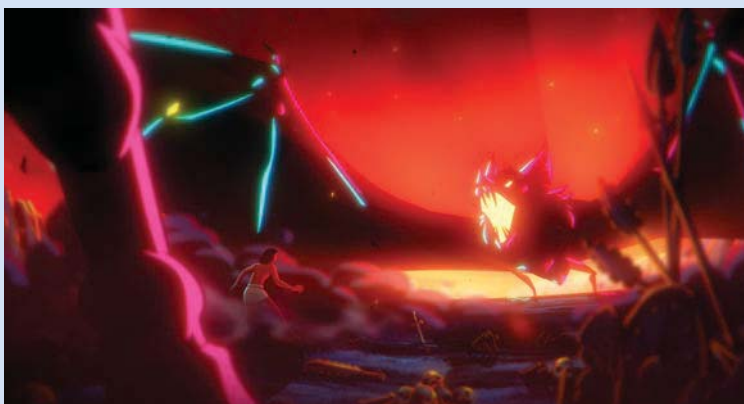
Mexican Vengeance: Years after the father of a young Aztec boy is murdered by Spanish conquistadors, he becomes a priest in the court of King Moctezuma II and vows to fight the brutal invaders in *Aztec Batman: Clash of Empires*.





TV/STREAMING

THE DARK KNIGHT'S MEXICAN REBOOT



Warner Bros. Animation, Ánima and Chatrone deliver *Aztec Batman*, a fantastic Mesoamerican take on the popular DC hero.

By Jeff Spry

Aztec *Batman: Clash of Empires* (*Batman Azteca: Choque de Imperios*) is the first team-up between Warner Bros. Animation, Mexico's Ánima and *The Book of Life* producer Chatrone. It's a colorful synthesis of art and storytelling that will have audiences experiencing the Batman universe through the volatile lens of 16th century Mesoamerica, when Hernán Cortés and his Spanish exploration crew first came into contact with the mighty Aztec civilization.

Executive produced by Sam Register and Tomás Yankelovich, the feature-length *Aztec Batman* film is directed by Juan Meza-León (*Harley Quinn*), with Ánima's José C. García de Letona and Fernando de Fuentes producing beside Chatrone's Aaron D. Berger and Carina Schulze. The feature gets its national digital and home entertainment release in September.

Meet the Caballero de Noche

Looking back at the genesis of the ambitious project, Meza-León tells *Animation Magazine*, "*Batman Azteca* or *Aztec Batman*. Those two words together were just ... Pow!

It just sounds crazy enough, and I said, 'Yeah, I'll do it.' It came to me from the people at Ánima Estudios. They had this idea, and they were looking to work with somebody new that was into more of that comic-book kind of stuff, to try something different and come up with a cool story and a dynamic way to tell it."

He says the challenge was to make it all seem authentic and to treat the property with the utmost care and respect. "I'm a huge Batman fan, and I have little collectibles and everything. I also grew up listening to all the mythology of the Aztec empire, and [bringing] those together were a unique opportunity. The challenge was to try and put as much period accuracy and Indigenous culture in, as far as the way they were dressed and the language. Also, a huge amount of research went into getting the backgrounds right and how to get the cities accurately, and what the colors meant."

The mashup tale focuses on a young Aztec boy named Yohualli whose chieftain father is murdered by Spanish conquistadors. He travels to the city of Tenochtitlan to warn King Moctezuma II and his high priest of this imminent threat. The story unfolds with our

hero seeking retribution. Using the temple of Tzinacan, the bat god, as a lair, Yohualli trains with his mentor and assistant, Acatzin, developing equipment and weaponry to confront the Spaniard invasion, protect Moctezuma's temple and avenge his father's death.

"We had anthropologist Dr. Alejandro Barriga supervising the whole project and approving the material and also offering ideas," explains Meza-León. "Because there's no photographs [from that time period], everything's just written and interpreted. It was a lot of work creating that world and mixing history with fantasy. If you're a comics fan, this is an Elseworlds edition of Batman. It was difficult to find a doctor that understood what we were trying to do. Dr. Barriga, being a comic-book fan, he got it. You've got to have childhood wonder, and he was very helpful in getting us to develop this beautiful art."

Much of the project's mystique emanates from the mythic structure that's already baked into most superhero origin stories, but especially Bruce Wayne's, with his embracing of the bat as a symbol of nocturnal fear and intimidation in his quest for vengeance against evil forces.



Marvick Núñez's provocative character designs and Diego Olascoaga's art direction on *Aztec Batman* drew upon many historical and artistic sources to manifest this cinematic collision.

"We became really good friends because we collaborate a lot together," Meza-León shares. "This was the first time Marvick did human characters; [before] it was all cartoons. He put a lot of effort into it. From the get-go, I wanted it to have that epic quality of movies like *Gladiator* or *Kingdom of Heaven* but in animated form. Hopefully, you'd get so involved in the story you'd forget it was an animated film."

Giving *Aztec Batman* the essential ingredients for an entertaining, accessible Batman movie was at the top of Meza-León's mind during the whole creative process.

"In every Elseworlds story, there is the spirit of vengeance and trying to turn tragedy into motivation for good," Meza-León notes. "It's a human option, and I think it works in every culture everywhere. A lot of the stories of Batman involve a bit of the supernatural and mysticism, and the Aztec culture is loaded with that. And there is such a thing as bat gods in Mexican culture. There used to be an Aztec bat god called Tzinacan and also in the Mayan culture called Camazotz. The worshipping of a bat deity did exist. So the possibility of a warrior donning the cape or the mask of this deity in the Aztec culture seems very real. That's why you see jaguars and eagles and all these animal warriors, because they believed they would embody

the spirit of the animal or deity.

"I wanted to bring that element of mystery, the spookiness, the darkness, to it that Batman has. And hopefully, if we continue to explore it, we'll see more of that detective side of Batman, not just the superhero. So we lay the groundwork for it, and it would be cool to keep exploring that."

Digging around the Batman sandbox to convert the Dark Knight's notorious rogues' gallery into Aztec iterations proved too



enticing to resist for Meza-León and his team, who give Mesoamerican makeovers to Poison Ivy, Catwoman, Two-Face and Joker, plus a few surprises.

"Of course, the Aztec version of the Joker had to be there," says the director. "We set him up to be an amazing villain. For Poison Ivy, we needed a goddess to introduce us a little bit into the mythic world of the Aztec culture, and what better way to show it than through Mother Earth? Growing up in Mexico, we had smaller versions of comics, and that was the first time I got into *Batman* and the TV show of the 1960s. So I've always been a fan, and later on, I read *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*. Then, of course, when I was 11 years old, Tim Burton's *Batman* came out and that was it. I fell into the bat cave and never came out."

A Musical Collaboration

Another one of *Aztec Batman*'s indelible charms is Ego Plum's rousing score, which manages to bring a rhythmic tribal energy while feeling like an organic extension of the story and

is also subtly interwoven with Oscar-winning composer Danny Elfman's heroic notes from Burton's 1989 *Batman* feature.

"We got [Elfman's] blessing, and so Warner Bros. was cool enough to agree with it," he adds. "We just borrowed a few bars, the ones that hit you right in the feels about Batman. It was key to have those bars to make you feel that it's part of the world, yet it's its own thing at the same time."

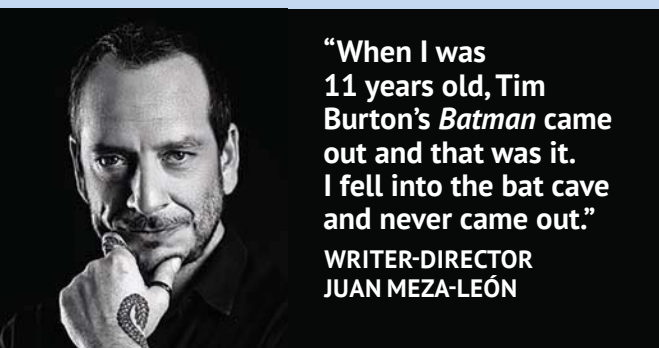
Animation duties here were split between animation studios in Mexico, Peru and Brazil in an international effort that made scheduling meetings difficult due to the time difference. Distribution was handled by several animation houses in Latin America and Mexico with Ánima.

"What I love most about this project is getting to share in the enthusiasm of artists from across Latin

America who not only had the opportunity to work on a DC film, but got to see their own culture and identity celebrated in the work they were creating," says producer Aaron D. Berger, CEO and co-founder of Chatrone. "I hope audiences around the world see this animated film as a chance to reimagine their own mythologies — and to recognize the shared threads that connect us all through today's superhero stories."

"This was a huge learning curve for all these small animation studios, because up to that point it was all Saturday morning cartoon stuff," concludes Meza-León. "It was [like] going from *SpongeBob* to *Mask of the Phantasm*, so that leap was huge, and I think they did an amazing job. It couldn't have been done without the collaboration of a huge team from Mexico and Latin America. I hope this movie brings a spotlight to all that talent so we can continue growing as an industry and also show some of the rich culture of Mexico." ■

***Aztec Batman: Clash of Empires* debuts in theaters in Mexico on Sept. 18. It will be released digitally and on 4K Ultra HD/Blu-ray/DVD on Sept. 19.**

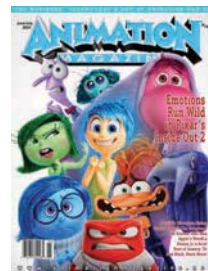
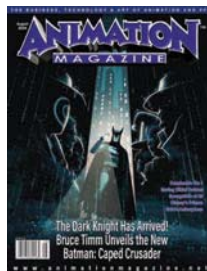
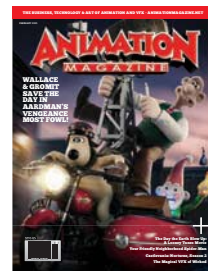
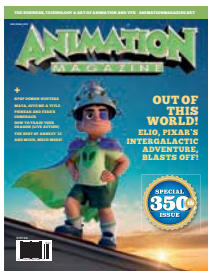


"When I was 11 years old, Tim Burton's *Batman* came out and that was it. I fell into the bat cave and never came out."

**WRITER-DIRECTOR
JUAN MEZA-LEÓN**



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FROM THE HEART OF AFRICA



Eyes of Wakanda's showrunner Todd Harris discusses the creative inspirations behind the new Marvel Animation anthology series.

By Ryan Gaur

Following on the heels of January's *Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man*, the latest slice of Marvel animation moves from New York to a fictional African state in *Eyes of Wakanda*. Based on characters in the *Black Panther* line of comics and live-action films, the anthology show highlights stories from different corners and time periods of Wakanda; a vast, technologically advanced country home to the Hatut Zaraze, a secret police force whom the series follows.

To helm the show, Marvel higher ups Kevin Feige and Brad Winderbaum tapped Todd Harris, a talented story artist who has worked with the studio since 2017's *Thor: Ragnarok*. "I originally pitched this project way back during the production of *Infinity War* (2019),"

says Harris. "I pitched it to Kevin as a potential precursor to the *Black Panther* movie, but that was before the MCU was thinking about animation at all. When I moved over to *Black Panther* to help out, I pitched it to Ryan [Coogler] because I thought it was such a compelling idea and I would've loved to see it get made, even if I wasn't a part of it. In hindsight, it was probably pretty presumptuous, but fortunately for me, the pitch took root with Ryan, Kevin and Brad."

The Past Is Prologue

His past at the studio was key to Harris landing the role, "My experience with Marvel as a board artist was extremely helpful. Working so closely with the producers, directors and the crew let me see so many examples of how to play in the MCU's amazing sandbox.

Those years working together really helped me grow into my leadership position. The greatest lesson I learned was for me to try to be the kind of director that I would like to work for."

Harris' development of the idea saw the show go through many iterations, but one concept helped it all come into focus. He recalls, "There were a lot of different ideas and suggestions, different framing devices. That's how development is. But the core idea stayed the same and really helped anchor the project conceptually. Real history meets Wakandans, each interaction teaching you something new about Wakanda and maybe something new about our collective past. The

"My experience with Marvel as a board artist was extremely helpful. Working so closely with the producers, directors and the crew let me see so many examples of how to play in the MCU's amazing sandbox."

SHOW CREATOR AND DIRECTOR TODD HARRIS

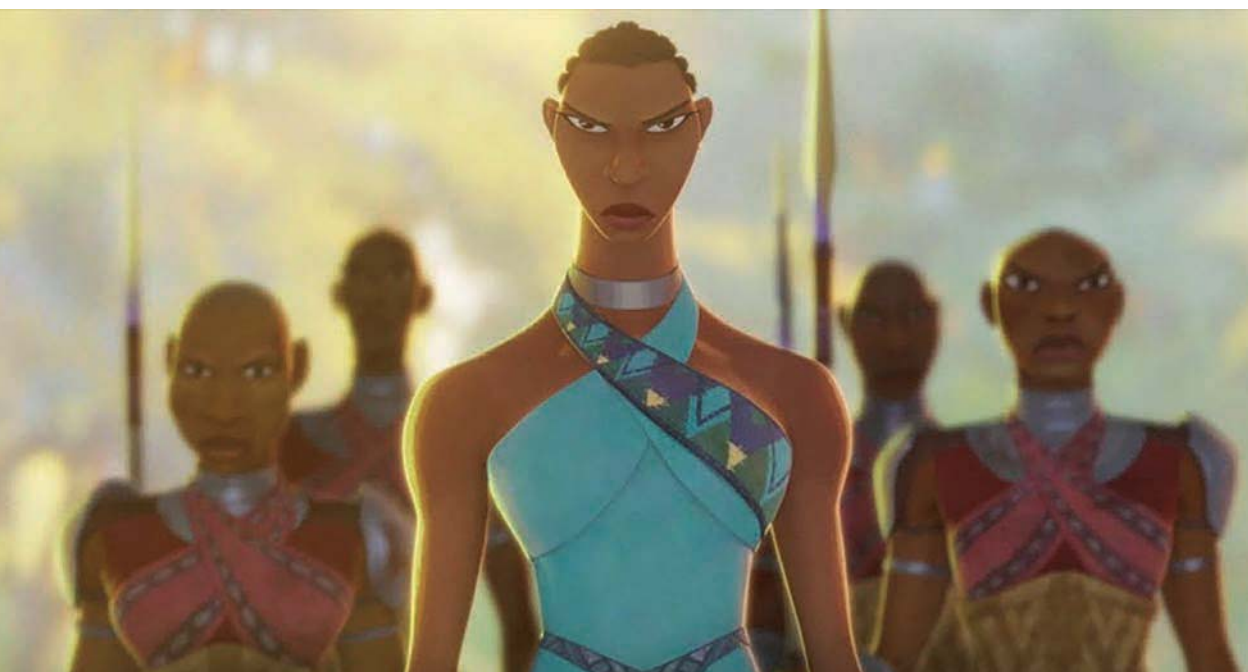


really did an amazing job embodying the spirit of that work."

All three artists' influence is clear in the show. Barnes' ability to make it seem like people and items are blending into one massive monolith and Cornwell's use of stark color combinations are immediately on display.

make a unique but producible show."

The 2018 *Black Panther* film is symbolic of a new age of representation in mainstream cinema due to the extreme lengths taken to achieve cultural authenticity. Picking up on that legacy provided challenges and joy for Harris, "*Black Panther* was a watershed moment. The



New Warriors:

Featuring a stellar voice cast that includes Winnie Harlow, Cress Williams, Lynn Whitfield, Gary Anthony Williams, Steve Toussaint and Anika Noni Rose, *Eyes of Wakanda* is billed as the first series of Phase Six of the MCU.

institution of the Hatute Zeraze (War Dogs) is the real focus of the show. The individual agents help us unravel the mystery of their mission, their methods and how they evolve over hundreds of centuries."

Other Marvel animated series like *Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man* and *What If...?* employ CG animation in different ways. *Eyes of Wakanda* fits with the trend of having its own visual identity, with painterly textures pairing up with more realistic-looking characters. "More than anything I wanted the show to feel as if it was handmade as much as it could," explains Harris. "I took influences from the amazing American painter Ernie Barnes as well as early 20th century illustrator Dean Cornwell, with some energy from fine artist Charles Bibbs. In my head, those were the cross-sections that I was chasing. Our team

The same can be said for Bibbs' own style of drawing human faces, present in the character designs in *Eyes of Wakanda*. Harris continues, "Strong composition, depth and dramatic posing are all just part of our creative DNA. We never consciously tried to adhere to any house look. Fortunately, at Marvel Animation we're encouraged to find a voice for the type of story we're telling. Hopefully that unique voice is reflected in the final result."

Marvel allowing its creators to find the voice of each show means they differ greatly in how they're made. "In terms of Marvel's animation pipeline, each show is its own universe, so the workflow varies from show to show," says Harris. "The methodologies, technologies and artistry are all bespoke to each series. Ours was no different, juggling the need to innovate with the use of common practices in order to

conception of *Eyes of Wakanda* was to prop up the mantle of the *Black Panther* by seeing how incredible Wakandans are. Our creative challenge wasn't trying to find the authenticity. The challenge was restraining our collective excitement. The entire crew is full of diehard fans from the writers room to the revisionist crew. There's so much passion and dedication for the subject matter, authenticity was almost a forgone conclusion. I, myself, and the whole crew felt honored to be able to make this." ■

***Eyes of Wakanda* premiered on Disney+ on Aug. 1. The four-episode series is executive produced by Ryan Coogler, Brad Winderbaum, Kevin Feig, Louis D'Esposito, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, Kalia King, Todd Harris and Dana Vasquez-Eberhardt. The show is created and directed by Todd Harris.**



TV/STREAMING



TO ECUADOR WITH LOVE, MELODRAMA & GUINEA PIGS

Gonzalo Cordova on the wild, stop-motion world of his brilliant new Adult Swim show *Women Wearing Shoulder Pads*.

By Ramin Zahed

What would you get if you merged the madcap, surreal frames of '80s-era Pedro Almodóvar movies with the beautifully art-decorated stop-motion world of Mexico's Cinema Fantasma studio? The irresistible result would be creator Gonzalo Cordova's brilliant new quarter-hour Adult Swim comedy *Women Wearing Shoulder Pads*, which premiered on Aug. 17. The series follows the adventures of an arrogant, rich Spanish woman named Marioneta who moves to Quito, Ecuador, to exploit the region's guinea pig population and turn them into a lucrative business. Along the way, she meets a wild range of eccentric and ambitious women who are all trying to navigate the fast-changing worlds of love, family and business.

This clever fever dream of a show all began in Cordova's head, first as a simple title. During a recent interview with *Animation Magazine*, the creator says he was unemployed at the time and was riding a bus when the title simply popped into his head. "I had recently been to the Bob Baker Marionette Theater in Los Angeles," he recalls. "Around that time, I was obsessed with a Pedro Almodóvar collection on the Criterion Channel. I watched that entire

collection very quickly. So, all I really had at that point was the title and the vague idea of mixing marionettes with Almodóvar's '80s melodramas."

In Search of the Right Project

A while later, Cordova found himself very frustrated with three development projects that had landed on his lap but with which he felt no real connection. "They were adult animated comedies about Mexican families living in Boyle Heights or East L.A.," he says. "I had nothing against those projects, but I felt like I was being approached solely because I was Latino. But I did need the money, so I said yes to one of these projects. Within a few hours, it started feeling really wrong. I'm Ecuadorian and the majority of my childhood was spent in South Florida. My experiences are very different from the shows I was being asked to develop. But more importantly, the projects themselves were not really well suited for my writing style and my comedic voice. I wanted to make something much weirder and much more specific and personal"

That's when he began writing the pitch for *Women Wearing Shoulder Pads*. "I wrote the pitch on Friday, and by Monday morning, I had something I was really happy with and told my agents I did not want to take that other job," says Cordova. "A few weeks later, I pitched it to Adult Swim. My gut instinct told me it was the only possible home for this show. I had

recently worked as a writer *Tuca & Bertie*, which was originally at Netflix but moved to Adult Swim for the second and third season. It was already such a unique and original show, and it was refreshing to see Adult Swim wanting us to lean into that. The majority of the notes from Adult Swim for that show were to make jokes and stories more surprising. I felt like with *Women Wearing Shoulder Pads*, I had something that could surprise them!"

Cordova's original pitch and pilot came from trying to figure out what an Almodóvar film from the 1980s would look like if it was made with marionettes. "Adult Swim had some concerns about the feasibility of marionettes, so the idea shifted to stop motion," says the creator. "The rest of the show came from developing based on that idea, but I think it also ended up becoming a very strange brew of my childhood memories of Ecuador mixed with my lifelong obsession with melodramas, specifically from the '40s and '50s. The plotline of a Spaniard coming to Quito, Ecuador, to breed *cuyes* was really me trying to ask myself, what would happen if a main character from an Almodóvar film stepped into the world of my childhood? In 1986, my family lived in Ecuador, and the family stories I grew up hearing about that time were so exaggerated and melodramatic, it felt like a good world for an Almodóvar character to step into!"

Cordova made his famous pitch back in August 2020, and he began work on the



Women on the Verge: Gonzalo Cordova was inspired by the melodramatic characters of Pedro Almodóvar movies and his own childhood in Ecuador in the 1980s to create the world of *Women Wearing Shoulder Pads*.



pilot for the show with Cinema Fantasma in Mexico in the summer of '21. When they delivered the pilot, they had another long wait until the writers' room officially kicked off in September 2022. "There were some delays while we waited for a production order," he says. "During that time, we were



approved to work on designs and storyboards, but we finally officially started production sometime in the fall of 2023. From that point on, we worked consistently"

Cinema Fantasma to the Rescue

The show creator praises the work done by Cinema Fantasma in Mexico City. "They are currently also debuting *I Am Frankelda*, their first feature film and the first stop-motion feature made in Mexico," he says. "We also recorded in Mexico City and in Quito, Ecuador. Other than me; the writers; my wife, Rachel Kinnard, who designed costumes; and the folks from the Adult Swim side, this show was almost entirely made by people living in Latin America."

The stylish puppets created for the show were about a foot tall, made for a 1:6 scale production. "When you hold them, they really feel like dolls," says Cordova. "Every time I visited, I was too much in awe. The sets ranged from 4x4 feet to 12x12 feet, depending on the need. For example, in the fifth episode, we feature a big and extravagant New Year's Eve party. That set was really big and impressive

in person. I remember also finding some of the big, expansive exteriors kind of humbling, realizing that a team of artists went through so much effort for a scene that was ultimately me and the writers being silly."

Cordova says that the very human, hand-crafted aspect of the show is what really warms his heart. "The show is wacky and big, but it's also very personal," he notes. "I put a lot of myself into it, but that's true for so many people on the team. I think



the initial drive to make this show was to make something totally unique and new. And I really think we achieved that by being very true to our own artistic instincts, and as a result, I see so many people's fingerprints on this."

One of the biggest challenges for the show was that Cordova had to work remotely from his home in Pasadena, California. He says, "I visited as often as I could, but I had to really trust the team. We met frequently over Zoom and talked constantly on WhatsApp, but it was hard for me not being in the mix. The writers' room also took place at the tail end of the pandemic, so we did that all over Zoom as well. By the end of it, I really missed being able to just stroll up to an actual human and ask them if they had a nice weekend."

Las Mujeres en Español

Another reason the arrival of *Women Wearing Shoulder Pads* is cause for celebration is that it is the first Spanish-language, all-women-cast series in the 24-year history of Adult Swim!

Cordova says that element was intentional from the very first pitch. "In melodramas, the men often recede into the background, and it becomes almost funny," he explains. "I wanted to heighten that with a hard-and-fast rule that we'd never hear a male voice in the show. At

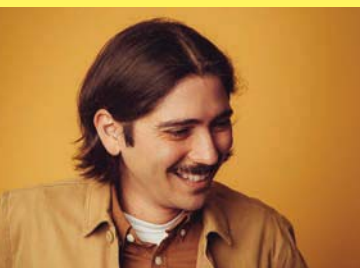


some point during the pilot, I casually mentioned to Adult Swim that I wanted it to be in Spanish. I think I was trying to pull a fast one on them by treating it like it was no big deal. Surprisingly, Adult Swim let me make the pilot in Spanish, and then when we got a series order, we just kept going in Spanish and no one stopped us. We did have a few conversations about it, but every time, I was like ... I guess we can keep going in Spanish."

Cordova and his team wrote the scripts in English, and he worked closely on the translation with the show's voice director, Mireya Mendoza, and their Ecuadorian consultant Pancho Viñachi. "My Spanish is pretty good, but I grew up in the U.S.," he adds. "Without them this show would not feel as authentic to the way Spanish is spoken in Latin American countries."

Now that the world gets to experience the wild adventures of *Marioneta* and her friends every week on Adult Swim, Cordova hopes audiences will enjoy the wild spirit of adventure and fun he and his team were trying to convey. "I hope everyone has fun," he concludes. "We built the show to be as fun as possible. Anything else they take away from it is just a bonus!" ■

***Women Wearing Shoulder Pads* premiered on Adult Swim on Aug. 17 at midnight.**



"In melodramas, the men often recede into the background, and it becomes almost funny. I wanted to heighten that with a hard-and-fast rule that we'd never hear a male voice in the show. At some point during the pilot, I casually mentioned to Adult Swim that I wanted it to be in Spanish. I think I was trying to pull a fast one on them by treating it like it was no big deal."

SHOW CREATOR GONZALO CORDOVA



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TV/STREAMING



ASPIRITED BEGINNING

Matt Roller shares the spooky secrets of his new Netflix animated series *Haunted Hotel*.

By Jeff Spry

Everyone loves an old-fashioned haunted house story, but it's even more enticing when the gloomy lodgings are centerpiece of a hilarious new adult animated series created by one of TV animation world's brightest stars.

Conceived by *Rick and Morty* veteran Matt Roller, *Haunted Hotel* materializes on Netflix this fall with its spirited tale of a single mom who inherits a spooky Gothic inn named the Undervale, which incidentally comes complete with a menagerie of undead, unhappy spirits. Along with the ghost of her deceased brother and two precocious kids, this reluctant innkeeper must try to work with these phantom inhabitants to manage a successful hotel for sleepy overnight guests.

"I think the deep origin [story] is that I've always loved horror," Roller tells *Animation Magazine*. "There's the obvious references in *Haunted Hotel*, but for the deeper cuts as well, I'd watch all of it. When I was at *Rick and Morty* some eight years ago, I had a lot of ideas for horror-based episodes. Today that would be pretty normal for *Rick and Morty*, but back in Season 2, that show was more sci-fi focused. It got me thinking that I would like to make my

own comedy vehicle that allows me to mine horror for comedy instead of sci-fi. Then I just pulled from inspirations in my life, growing up in New England, knowing about the old creepy hotels you see at the beach and upstate New York. Just trying to make a world that's compact and scary but also expansive."

Ghostly Visions

With its refreshingly appealing animation by Titmouse (*Digman!*; *Love, Death + Robots*; *Star Trek: Lower Decks*), gag-rich plotlines and esoteric humor, this delightfully demented show is also blessed with a stellar voice cast that includes the talents of Will Forte, Eliza Coupe, Skyler Gisondo, Natalie Palamides and Jimmi Simpson.

Roller serves as *Haunted Hotel*'s show-runner and executive produces alongside Chris McKenna (*Spider-Man: No Way Home*, *Spider-Man: Far from Home*), Dan Harmon (*Rick and Morty*, *Community*) and Steve Levy (*Rick and Morty*, *Community*), with Erica Hayes (*Rick and Morty*, *Carol & the End of the World*) as supervising director.

"We went into this with the idea that adult animation has a little bit of a silo to it," Roller explains. "Kids' animation can look incredibly wacky. In adult animation, there are boundaries to what the characters have to look like, and if they go outside those boundaries, you risk people thinking that it's for kids. On top of that, I also wanted it to look like its own universe. I didn't want

Boooooo Your Room Now: In *Haunted Hotel*, a single mother of two struggles to run an inn that happens to be haunted, with help from her estranged brother, who is now one of the ghosts! Will Forte, Eliza Coupe, Skyler Gisondo and Natalie Palamides are part of the voice cast.





our characters to look like they hopped over from *Rick and Morty* or *Digman!* or *Bob's Burgers*. We wanted realistic proportions so they'd be relatable and human, so our monsters would be scarier. We tried pushing some of their proportions with our art director, Robbie Erwin. So their arms are a little longer, we went with irises, which are less common; I know *Big Mouth* does them, but a lot of other shows don't. We found places in the margins to push and

and the hotel is, in a way, infinite. Because we can always find another room that, on a certain night, leads you somewhere else. But we wanted the hotel to feel really detailed and lived-in, and [like] a place you would want to go [to] even if it's scary."

Roller scored a coup with his vocal cast, landing actors who are all engaged and invested in the fun material, and the chemistry they conjured up is remarkable when considering the recording process.

"There's so many aspects to this world that make telling jokes in it very easy. Not that it's the point of the series, we're trying to honor the horror genre, but I counted upwards of 80 visual Easter eggs in the show!"

SHOW CREATOR MATT ROLLER

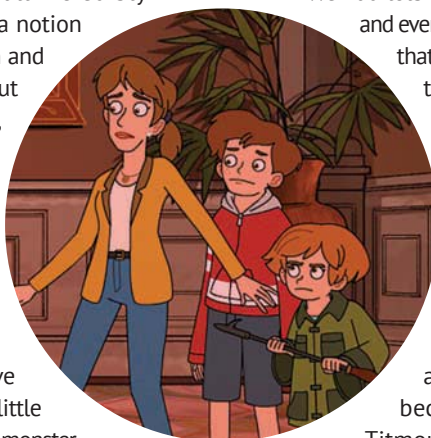


pull our characters to make them pop and feel distinct within our world."

Though Disneyland's Haunted Mansion attraction, *Beetlejuice*, *Ghostbusters* and TV's live-action sitcom *Ghosts* might come to mind as subtle influences for the project, Roller says that his favorite visual reference for *Haunted Hotel's* interior was director Ti West's *The Innkeepers*.

"The other thing I'm really happy about is our backgrounds, that we pushed a little bit more," he says. "We were trying to evoke the tactile nature of an old hotel — the creaky floors, the worn floorboards and slightly peeling wallpaper. [We] wanted to capture all that in this place. Because unlike a *Rick and Morty*, where every episode you're going to another planet, in our show, home base is always going to be the hotel

"We came together for a few table reads, but other than that they were separate records," he mentions. "I tried to make sure people had an awareness of the other records to know what they were playing off of. And it helps that they're all incredibly talented actors. I had a notion for [characters] Nathan and Catherine in casting, but back when I first wrote it, I was writing Abaddon as Jimmi Simpson as [Liam] McPoyle from *Always Sunny*, just that kind of sweaty confidence was what I wanted for this demon character. It would have been easy to make this little boy demon either have a monster



voice or a little kid voice. I thought both of those things would be predictable and limit the comedy. Instead, we just have Jimmi Simpson just being Jimmi, who's a tremendous comedic actor." For a seasoned animation pro like Roller who has a wicked sense of humor and is unafraid to wield it, *Haunted Hotel* and its collection of vulnerable main characters, both living and not-living, was a playground to immerse himself in.

"There are dozens of other stories that I'd love to do in this world. Some of it comes from my sitcom

training, coming from *Community* and *Rick and Morty*, which are so joke-dense," he says. "Archer is an influence, too. Then on top of that, we have this fun genre to play in. So, you constantly have games you can play. You can angle on a ghost. You can angle on a monster. You can focus on the 'hotel' of it all or the 'family' of it all. There's so many aspects to this world that make telling jokes in it very easy. Not that it's the point of the series, we're trying to honor the horror genre, but I counted upwards of 80 visual Easter eggs in the show. At the top of the slasher episode, when the kids are on the dock by the lake, that dock is modeled after the one in *Friday the 13th*. It's subtle and it doesn't matter, but we did it anyway because that's a reference for us and it's a great one."

Ghostly Visions

The accomplished team at Titmouse forged a fantastic working relationship with Roller that allowed him to enjoy every single step of *Haunted Hotel's* inventive enterprise.

"The vizdev process took us through the summer and a little of the fall of 2023," he adds.

"We had lots of great artists come in, and everyone threw in something that became foundational to the show. But we landed on Robbie Erwin, who brought everything home, alongside supervising director Erica Hayes. When it came time to animate, we brought in Titmouse Vancouver, and that's been awesome because it's all in-house Titmouse and everyone's on the same page.

"I've been on a lot of animated shows, and because of the nature of writers' rooms and how they wrap before production does, I've never been in the process of creating an animated show from start to finish, so there's been discovery for me here as well. I wrote the pilot eight years ago, and it sold two other times, and each time I got the rights back and finally brought it to Netflix where it got made. It's been a dream come true. I love this show and I love writing it."

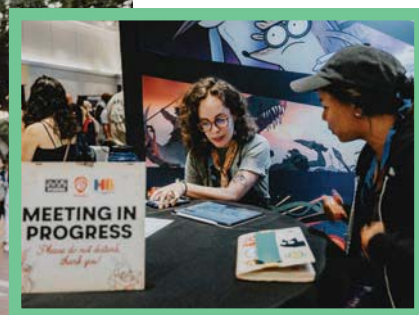
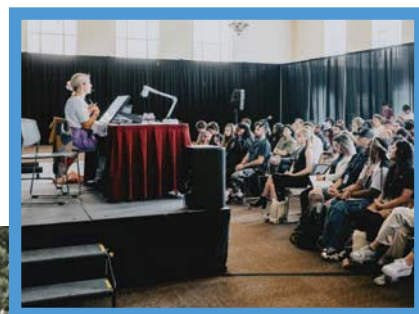
You can check in to Netflix's *Haunted Hotel* (Season 1: eight episodes) on Sept. 19.





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TV/STREAMING

A Devilishly Good Time

By Karen Idelson

How Vivienne Medrano's popular *Helluva Boss* show found a new home on Prime Video.

One of indie animation's most beloved shows of the past few years, *Helluva Boss* built a devoted fandom on YouTube with its surrealist style and macabre humor. The musical series, which premiered in October 2020, focuses on a company in Hell that offers hit men for hire to the living. The employees of Immediate Murder Professionals (I.M.P.) complete their assignments with the help of an ancient text created by a demon in Hell.

Known for taking risks in theme and character, and for bringing a sense of sheer daring to the arena of adult animation, series creator

and executive producer Vivienne Medrano had embraced a production pipeline with a smallish crew for her show.

Then, the proverbial phone rang with Prime Video on the other line. Thanks to a deal with the company, the first two seasons of *Helluva Boss*, which had already been released on YouTube, will be available on the streamer beginning Sept. 10 along with a new special episode; Seasons 3 and 4 have also been ordered.

Nurturing Talent

The significance of the deal and what it means for her series, as well as for other indie animators/creators, is not lost on Medrano, whose other



popular show, *Hazbin Hotel*, also found a nice home on Prime Video last year.

"I think the biggest genuine joy I have is that this success hopefully really opens the door for other really cool indie projects," says Medrano. "And even though indie animation has existed for a very long time and we didn't invent it, getting picked up like this and having so much ownership in this situation is important. I hope we'll see studios supporting more indie projects that still get to maintain themselves in the way they were created."

Medrano says she's thrilled that she has been able to carve a path for indie animators and "kind of break some of these walls down that will help new creators succeed with their projects and put them out there." She adds, "I hope this shows that you can do something like this if you are an independent animator and creator. I think seeing it succeed gives everyone else the push to do it themselves."

Hot Stuff: Vivienne Medrano's imaginative indie show *Helluva Boss* centers on the misadventures of the employees of a company in Hell that offers hit-man services in the realm of the living. The show first premiered online in October 2020.

I truly believe a rising tide lifts all ships. The tides are only going to continue to rise, because I know studios are looking to indie animation to find a lot more animated shows, which I think will lead to better deals and better setups for those creators."

She says the series will preserve the production pipeline they've already set up as it moves

show's budget has approximately doubled, so they will now be able to raise salaries to a more industry-standard rate.

Medrano believes the streamer is an ideal collaborator because it came to her with a lot of respect for what she had already created.

"[Prime Video has] been really awesome," says Medrano. "Sometimes being an animator



"Sometimes being an animator in this industry is very difficult ... I'm a big advocate of putting more of the ownership in the hands of the animators and creators. If you put something out on your own and you own the show, then if a studio comes to you, you have a lot more ability to get a deal that you're comfortable with."

SHOW CREATOR VIVIENNE MEDRANO

to Prime Video, because that pipeline lends itself to the intricate process of hand-drawn animation. The team will also continue to use tools like the Adobe suite, from Photoshop to Premiere, as well as 2D animation software like Harmony. Partnering with the company will also allow her to give more full-time and consistent work to the animators who have already been working on the YouTube show.

Before Prime Video teamed up with Medrano, the series was funded by merchandise sales, which meant they had to sell quite a bit to make their budget work. The creator says working with the streamer means the

in this industry is very difficult. You can run dry of original ideas. But I think the most exciting thing is that indie animation is becoming more of a feasible thing and that people can express their ideas in their work, and they can put out their original ideas. I'm a big advocate of putting more of the ownership in the hands of the animators and creators. If you put something out on your own and you own the show, then if a studio comes to you, you have a lot more ability to have a conversation and really get a deal that you're comfortable with."

Medrano has also worked steadily with





longtime collaborator and animator Brandon Rogers on developing the look and feel of the show. Their shared sensibilities helped define the unique perspective that permeates *Helluva Boss*.

"I think we share a sense of humor, which I think is very important in something like this," says Medrano. "Because when I first wanted to reach out to Brandon, I had been watching his work, and from that I really liked what he was doing. It was not only the humor, but also I felt it's got a lot of heart, and there were layers of things in there that were interesting. And that's what kind of made me push to try to meet with him, because I saw his work and it contained everything I like. I feel like our ideas about storytelling are aligned and we never really butt heads. It's a very casual process when we work. We just jump in."

Rogers agrees. "When we first started working together, it felt like two kids that just naturally gravitate to each other for an after-school assignment," he says. "Or it's like kids who work on a group project together in school. We also have the same kind of energy inside of us, kind of like Dr. Frankenstein or Walter White. We were very much tinkering on something that we were excited to get

out and be seen by the world. We have that same sense of playing with ideas."

For Medrano, who counts director Tim Burton and the classic Warner Bros. *Looney Tunes* cartoons among her biggest influences, having this creative connection with Rogers has been especially important as they produce new episodes of *Helluva Boss*. They're looking forward to honoring the expectations of the show's die-hard fans while also pushing beyond that into new, unexpected stories as well.

YouTube as Career Launcher

"I think that we also just have a lot in common in the sense that we [both] come from the world of YouTube," says Rogers. "I feel like we've very much helped each other climb up this ladder together, and I feel very proud of what we've done because we've had to resurrect everything ourselves. I hope it inspires other people, whether they're actors, writers, animators, directors. I feel like



there's a lot to be said about *Helluva Boss*."

He adds, "I think it can rival the hottest animations on TV right now, and yet these episodes were made of passion and love and were sustained by the fan base itself. And we are the fan base, because we're

making the art we want to see. And it's great to be a show made by fans, for fans. The corporate entities that we've worked with have been very gracious in letting us maintain that kind of energy [on] our project, which isn't very common, but I think that's what makes what we're doing unique. I hope it shows that anyone can do it, if they focus on what they believe in and what they make. If you're persistent and you push yourself, then you can get there and create the show you want to make." ■

***Helluva Boss* (Seasons 1 and 2) premieres Sept. 10 on Prime Video, along with a new short titled *Mission: Zero*. The second season of *Hazbin Hotel* will debut Oct. 29 on Prime Video.**





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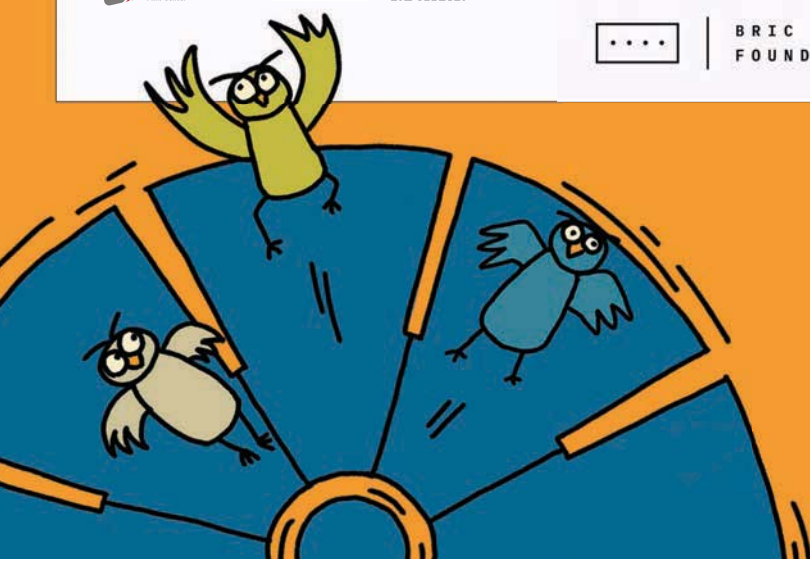
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TV/STREAMING



ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

Cottonwood Media principals David Michel and Zoé Carrera Allaix offer a special sneak peek at their exciting new series *20 Dance Street*.

Among the new animated projects debuting at the fall markets this year is Cottonwood Media's stunning production *20 Dance Street*, a beautifully crafted CG-animated show based on Elizabeth Barfety's book series and set against the backdrop of the prestigious Paris Opera Ballet School. Initially greenlit by German broadcaster ZDF and France Télévisions, the 26 x 26' series was first unveiled at Cartoon Forum two years ago. Targeting six- to 10-year olds, the show follows the adventures of 11-year-old Maya as she leaves her hometown in the Caribbean to join the famous Parisian school to pursue her dreams of becoming a world-class ballerina.

To find out more about this exciting new project, we caught up with *20 Dance Street*'s producers **Zoé Carrera Allaix** (*Around the World in 80 Days*, *Find Me in Paris*) and **David Michel** (*Totally Spies!*, *Martin Mystery*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Theodosia*), the co-founders of Cottonwood Media. Here is what they told us about their buzzy show:

Congrats to you two on your latest animated venture! How does it feel to be back on the international markets with a new show?

David: We're very excited to have an extended trailer ready for MIPJunior and MIPTV next month. We plan to start delivering the episodes in December and January. This is big news for us because, as you know, it's become quite difficult to produce and finance animation. One of the reasons we are able to move forward with this show is because it was financed four years ago and, of course, because the show is very special and different. I feel that everyone's afraid to take chances: They're either looking for very big IPs or they just want to rehash the same old thing because it did well 10 years before. We tried to do something that was a bit different but had a lot of commonalities with other great shows of the past. The idea was to create an animated show that follows a serialized *novela* format — almost in the Latin American sense, with big highs and big lows and unexpected twists.

Zoé: Yes, this animated show has more in common with our other successful live-action shows, because it's very realistic. The animation, all the stories, the backgrounds, are quite realistic because of the dance. We are working with the National Opera of Paris, their dancers and choreographers. We have to reproduce the dance movements in a very realistic way, and that costs a lot in animation. We decided to mix motion capture, which is usually used in video games, with keyframe animation that we use in movies and TV series. We worked with different subcontractors — one which specializes in motion capture and the other with expertise in keyframe animation. They use Maya for the animation and Unreal Engine. The main studio is 2 Minutes (based in Paris and on the island of Réunion), and the motion capture for the dance sequences is done by Mocaplab (also in Paris), and they have years of expertise in motion capture and have also worked with the dancers from the Opera. I'm very happy with the end results,

because the animation is very beautiful and authentic, and I'm a big dance fan myself.

David: What's very interesting is that the show is based on a series of 20-plus books that were commissioned and produced by the Paris Opera. They are very successful not only in France but also all across Europe. They are the ones providing us with the expertise, the dancers, etc.



Zoé Carrera Allaix
Co-Founder Cottonwood Media

What would you say the target age group is for the show?

David: I'd say it's for six- to 10-year olds. The characters on the show are around 15 years old, but it's very aspirational. It speaks to a younger audience. Traditionally, young girls are always drawn to ballet and horseback riding.

Can you talk a little bit about the overall visuals of the show?

Zoé: The school building in real life has a lot of white walls and glass surfaces. We needed to make it more colorful and interesting for our show. Our director found a way to make the backgrounds more poetic and visually dynamic. It's actually inspired by the Palais Garnier in Paris. It's a nice mix of 2D and CG animation with big splashes of color, so it's quite stylized and graphic and beautifully lit. We actually started working on the animation in June, and we're supposed to deliver the first three episodes by winter. In France, we expect to see the show premiere on TV in the fall of 2026. This will be our first animated project in three years.

What do you love about the results of your work so far

Zoé: I love everything about it — the characters, the drama, the relationships and the fact that we are telling these stories in animation, because we have already worked on a

live-action show about dance [and] the Paris Opera. In animation, you can do everything: You can have the character wear red shoes if you want, or you can actually show your character's dreams. Animation takes a lot longer to produce, but it offers you a lot of freedom. It's very technical, long and complicated, but it's very rewarding in the end.

David: I love the fact that the show is girl-skewing. Yes, there are lots of animated shows for preschool girls, but there aren't many shows out there for girls of this age group that aren't about magic or flying ponies. I am very happy that we're doing something that's quite different and original, and the storyline is serialized. One of the things that Zoé is a big advocate for is hiring as [much] female talent on the projects as possible. For example, on this show, we are very happy to have a young first-time female director named Romy Yao.

What is your take on the animation scene in Europe?

David: There have been some marginal changes that could be considered positive. Some studios like Disney and Apple continue to have animation commissions. But in Europe, it's mostly public broadcasters that are keeping everyone afloat — and that's a lot of people. There are two big issues: There are less orders with lower license fees in general, while costs are all going up due to inflation. Also, the streamers changed the standard order format to 10 or 13 half-hours, which has a huge impact because a company like ours has about 15 permanent employees. We need to pay them based on our margin every year, and that margin is proportional to the number of episodes you are producing each year. How can you retain the same number of people and company structure with fewer orders?

Zoé: In animation, you create and build all your characters and the sets; it costs a lot, so you need to produce a lot of episodes with them to make it efficient and feasible. You can't amortize with just 10 episodes.

David: Just looking at the market and what it can afford in terms of orders and financing, I think there are just too many production companies. So, I think we'll see more mergers and acquisitions. For us, we hope to continue working in both live action and animation.

Not Pliéng It Safe: A young girl named Maya leaves her home in the Caribbean to join the prestigious Paris Opera Ballet School in Cottonwood Media's ambitious new animated show *20 Dance Street*.



David Michel
President & Co-founder, Cottonwood Media

We have a new live-action show coming up called *The Lady Grace Mysteries* (commissioned by the BBC and ZDF), about a young girl who's a personal spy for Elizabeth I. It's a very cool period detective story. We've just finishing shooting it, and it comes out this fall.

So these two shows are the ones we're quite thrilled about this year. We're also developing more animated features in the future, which we find very exciting creatively. Stay tuned, because we'll have more to tell you in a few months! ■

Cottonwood Media's *20 Dance Street* is slated to premiere on France Télévisions in the fall of 2026. The 26 x 26' series is produced by David Michel, Zoé Carrera Allaix and Cecile Lauritano. (co-founders of Cottonwood Media) and produced in partnership with ZDF and Opéra National de Paris. Federation Kids & Family and ZDF Studios handle worldwide sales.







TV/STREAMING

MARKET VISION QUESTS



BBC Kids & Family and Blink Industry's
Children Vs Battle Superstars

European animation execs comment on the shrinking global animation landscape and their survival strategies in the upcoming fall content markets.

By Kambole Campbell

With fall TV events such as Cartoon Forum, MIPJunior and MIPCOM on the horizon, many producers are taking stock of the state of the children's animation market. *Animation Magazine* reached out to a number of producers, distributors and marketers in Europe to get their perspective on the shape of the industry going into the fall markets.

Of course, some of their feelings can be gleaned from the work on display. Carlos Biern, content and media sales director of

DeAPlaneta Kids & Family, touts a trio of projects. "We are very excited to show the third season and new digital content for our preschool brand, *Milo*, which has an amazing development and music-writing team," Biern says. DeAPlaneta will also be showing the first episodes of recently announced co-productions *Underdog* (a superhero sitcom from DreamWorks and Superprod) and *Karters* (developed with Mediawan and Tomy).

Grainne McNamara, VP of development (live action and animation) for BBC Studios Kids & Family promises "a fresh slate of

projects based on popular IP and a few that are original ideas," teasing new partnerships with creators and brands as well as updates on projects like *My Friend Maisy*, co-produced with Trustbridge Entertainment and picked up by Sky. Also, new original IP: *Rafi the Wishing Wizard*, a magical realist preschool show following a family of modern-day wizards.

Searching for Unicorns

Some industry pros got straight to the point, with Emmanuèle Pétry, the producer and head of international at Dandelooo, saying that she and partner Jean-Baptiste Wery will be at Cartoon Forum with a different approach this year. "For the first time in many years, we'll be attending the event with a slightly different approach – we'll be attending with

Market Fresh: Among the new animated fare available for buyers this fall are (top row, from left): *My Great Great Great Family*, *Cuquin*, *Karters*; (second row, from left): *Underdog*, *My Friend Maisy* and *Max & Bunny*; (third row from left) *Hold on Gaston* and *Rafi the Wishing Wizard*.



JULIEN BORDE

our 'hands in our pockets.' Our focus will be to attend the presentations and look for the best/standout series and specials in order to offer our international sales teams' high-quality content and expertise. We will be not presenting a new project this time as we are immersed and working on the development and financing of *My Great Great Great Family*, an original comedy series for [kids] 6-10 created by Thomas Personeni — the project we pitched last year."

Pétry breaks down some highlights from Dandelooo's MIPJunior and MIPCOM lineup, including three new series now in production: *Max and Bunny* for Canal+ (26 x 5', delivery December 2025), which explores the everyday world from a child's perspective; *Hold on Gaston!* for TF1 (52 x 11', delivery Q2 2027), about a unicorn whose colors change according to his emotions; and Season 2 of *Billy the Cowboy Hamster* for France TV



GRAINNE MCNAMARA

"Anime is dominating the global market and capturing market share from traditional children's animation. With YouTube and Roblox serving as primary destinations for many kids worldwide, this shift has led us to develop a new slate of digital-first content."

JULIEN BORDE, PRESIDENT
MEDIAWAN KIDS AND FAMILY

(52 x 11', expected 2026).

Miguel Aldasoro, international sales and co-production director at Ánima Kitchent, says the studio's slate will include shows based on established and new IP that "have been tested and refined through our digital-first strategy." Aldasoro mentions *Cuquin* (formerly *Cleo & Cuquin*), which will have new seasons for HBO Max and Cartoonito, as well as *Tippi T-Rex*, "which has just secured a major distribution and licensing deal in China." Ánima Kitchent's latest IP, *Howly & Wooly*, will also be making the rounds as it prepares for its first digital test. Aldasoro says the studio will be looking for partners to co-produce, distribute and license these brands globally.

"We will be very active at Cartoon Forum, with shows from our different studios and in co-production with other production talents," says Julien Borde, president of Mediawan Kids & Family. Its offerings will be extensive: At Cartoon Forum, there will be the comedy series *Chococat & Me* (Somewhere Animation, 52 x 13'), action-adventure series *Temtem* (Marla Studios, Somewhere Animation, 26 x 26'); the hip-hop-focused *Titus Little Prince of Rap* (Submarine, Why Not Productions, 26 x 10'); and stop-motion comedy *Prout* (Wajnbrose Productions, Method Animation, 52 x 7').

At MIPJunior, Mediawan will premiere anime comedy series *Ki & Hi in the Panda*

"BBC Studios is committed to being open about where and how we're using AI. We promise transparency with audiences and training staff how to use these tools."

GRAINNE MCNAMARA, BBC
STUDIOS KIDS AND FAMILY VP
OF DEVELOPMENT

Kingdom (Method Animation, Drawsome Studio, Belvision 52 x 13'), as well as the first episodes of *Tuff Pom* (Wildseed, Method Animation, 40 x 13'), an animated series for France TV and the BBC.

Prioritizing action-adventure for ages six to 10, Borde says Mediawan is beginning production on "a new original idea by Stephane Berry, creator of *Totally Spies!*" In addition, the company will have *Artefacts – Thieves of Thieves* (Somewhere Animation, 26 x 26') for TF1 as well as *Eldrador* (Toon2Tango, Method Animation, 52 x 13') and *Jet the Vet*, an original series from Alexander Bar (Method Animation, 52 x 11').

Their preschool lineup features *Maddie + Triggs* (Turnip + Duck, 52 x 7'), *ThinkerBen & Motor* (Metaxilaxis, Toon2Tango, 26 x 11'), *Max & Bird* (Tchack, Submarine, 78 x 7'), *Pango* (Method Animation 78 x 7') and a reboot of *The Magic Roundabout* (Wildseed, 52 x 13'). There are also second seasons of *Idefix and the Indomitables*, *BarnKidz* and *The Three Musketeers*. Borde caps off the list by hinting at a partnership with EL Reino Infantil. This will be on the new *Wadoo*, which will premiere next year on YouTube.

The State of Play

DeAPlaneta's Biern is optimistic about where the market is heading. "There are some very interesting new opportunities emerging in the anime and kidult space, many of which come from the interactive and digital sector," he says, adding that those trends will remain.

Meanwhile, Borde of Mediawan acknowledges a slowdown in children's content orders in the U.S. and the effects of the "AI revolution" but also says the market seems to be in better shape after the 2025 Annecy Festival. Borde also suggests that commissioners (broadcasters or streamers ordering and buying animated shows) are leaning more toward bridge content and big kids' programming. Borde says some of these changes stem from the popularity of different mediums and industries, such as anime and its constant success on streaming. He continues, "Anime is dominating the global market and capturing market share from traditional children's animation. With YouTube and Roblox serving as primary destinations for many kids worldwide, this shift has led us to develop a new slate of digital-first content."

McNamara, from BBC Studios Kids & Family, also points to the influence of anime,

noting not just its immense viewership but how “the style has really taken hold of the animation industry.” She says the company’s slate reflects this popularity, including the in-development, anime-inspired *Children Vs Battle SuperStars* (working title), a 22 x 22’ martial arts tournament series made as part of a first-look deal with Blink Industries.

Aldasoro of *Ánima Kitchent* thinks it’s a highly competitive but opportunity-rich market, citing growing demand for content that can adapt well to different regions, cultures and platforms. “That’s why maintaining a digital-first approach is essential for us,” he says, “testing both short- and long-form formats to validate IPs before making larger production commitments.” Aldasoro also sees a trend in preschool segments, with IPs developing movies alongside their series. “This gives a competitive edge, as a movie helps expand brand value and reach new audiences,” he says.

Agreeing that it’s still a highly competitive market, Pétry of Dandelooo says there is “an overload of children’s content.” She underlines the power of artistry even in a turbulent market that is committed to safe choices. “The trend seems to focus more than ever on established brands and turning old IPs into new series by tapping into the nostalgia of young parents. Call us crazy (or naïve), but we continue to believe in the power of original storytelling, creating new concepts and new characters because there are such wonderful artists out there who deserve to let their talent bloom!”

As is happening in many industries, the prevalence of AI is throwing more uncertainty into the mix. Many of those interviewed showed wariness about adopting such



EMMANUÈLE PÉTRY

technology. Biern notes the importance of tech in expanding a brand and is interested in how some AI tools can add to production and distribution, but adds that “we are less excited about generative AI.”

On the same subject, Borde says, “When properly utilized, with full respect for artists and copyrights, generative AI can address one of the key challenges facing our industry by fluidifying production pipelines. It can also enable us to create more interactive and customized content.”

Borde sees animation as “tech-savvy” enough to withstand the effects of generative AI, while adding that he “understand[s] the fears and concerns raised.” He says that “animation has survived and benefitted from many technological revolutions, and animation professionals are among the best positioned in the entertainment industry to navigate such a transformation.”

Others are more apprehensive about AI. Aldasoro also makes the distinction between AI tools and generative AI, calling the former “an essential part of our workflows, especially for data analysis.” He adds, “On the creative side, we see the potential of AI-assisted production, but we approach it with caution considering both legal aspects and the need to maintain our brand’s quality, originality and consistency.” Meanwhile, McNamara says, “BBC Studios is committed to being open about where and how we’re using AI,” promising transparency with audiences and training staff how to use these tools.

Pétry of Dandelooo draws a line. While noting that, like others in the industry, Petry is keeping an eye on AI tools and thinking

“We’re keeping an eye on innovations that could enhance the creative process and production quality. But we are extremely concerned about the situation and threat AI brings to employment and absolutely wish to preserve the talent pool.”

EMMANUÈLE PÉTRY, PRODUCER AND HEAD OF INTERNATIONAL AT DANDELOOO

about “innovations that could enhance the creative process and production quality,” she speaks firmly against generative AI. “We are extremely concerned about the situation and threat it brings to employment and absolutely wish to preserve the talent pool,” she says, emphasizing its existential threat to artists. “The main issue, which I don’t think has yet been tackled, and [is] far from being resolved, is the legal aspect of this evolution,” she adds. “Until there is full transparency and regulation, we will not consider AI exploitation in our own productions.”

Although the market adapts to innovation, what future is there for such changes without the consideration and protection of artists? When considering how the industry will address this, Pétry says integrity is going to be key: “It is in the tough times that you see which companies keep humanistic values and take the high road.” ■

The MIPJunior market takes place at the Palais des Festivals in Cannes, France, on Oct. 11 and 12. For more info, visit mipjunior.com.



CARLOS BIERN



MIGUEL ALDASORO



DINOS *in* SPACE!

Meet the creative team behind the new Nick preschool show *Tim Rex in Space*, which explores real kid problems against a whimsical setting.

By Kambole Campbell

Combining two obsessions of every young child — dinosaurs and space — the preschool series *Tim Rex in Space* looks to use its adventures to create curiosity about the everyday.

The co-production between Nickelodeon, Mint Copenhagen and Milkshake! (by the U.K.'s Channel 5), and animated by U.K.- and Ireland-based JAM Media, is directed by Sam Dransfield, who previously worked on Nickelodeon's *Bossy Bear*. The series is about a T. rex named Tim, his siblings and his friends, all of whom live in Rumbleton — a town built across a series of interconnected asteroids.

Even with such a fantastical setting, “reliability” was the key word for Dransfield and other artists working on the show. “Thematically, even though the show is set in space, very few episodes are about some kind of crazy far-off sci-fi experience,” Dransfield says. “A core part of almost every story which we

kick off on the show is the recognizable nature of the things that Tim encounters. Despite the fact he lives on an asteroid cluster, he has real kid problems. For instance, lots of stories are just about him and his brother and sister relating to each other and dealing with whatever challenges that come their way. But encased within this out-of-this-world setting of Rumbleton out in space.”

Intergalactic Spin

Head writer Andy Potter (*Sharkdog, Class Dismissed*) emphasizes that despite the outlandishness of the premise — a family of dinosaurs in space — “We really tried to ensure that Tim felt like a real kid, experiencing the true emotions, problems and dilemmas that our young audience would recognize, albeit with an intergalactic spin.” Dransfield concurs and expands on their goal of fusing two fascinating topics that have long been compelling to children. With a clear concept in place, they had to build around “that heart

to the show, which is Tim himself, and then that allows you to explore this combination,” the director says. “Equally, we were keen that comedy should always be front and center,” Potter adds, “and to include gags that would resonate with children and parents, so families would catch moments in each episode where they’d think, ‘Yep, that’s just like us.’”

That balance, of course, also influenced the show’s art direction. Series designer and art director Joshua Hogan says it was a “tough one to [figure] out at first,” as the premise gave them so many possibilities that it was hard to narrow it down. What helped was to pair their initial idea — bold colors and expressive characters — with what Hogan describes as “the simplified, rounded shapes seen throughout both the character designs and environments.” He continues, “It helped us build a whimsical universe that feels both fresh and familiar at the same time. Not too futuristic but also not too ordinary.” Dransfield says they also took early steps



“That’s hopefully what the series achieves; where you see a little asteroid in the title sequence up in the corner and [think] perhaps the episode is going to be about whatever’s on that asteroid.”

SERIES DIRECTOR SAM DRANSFIELD

to make the show feel “more terrestrial” to keep the young audience on familiar soil. Experiments with colors were attempted in visual development, but eventually it was decided that, in this case, the grass should be green, the sky blue.

Episode director Jess Patterson (*Nova Jones*) explains how this translated into the animation: “As *Tim Rex in Space* is an action-packed series with a lot of heart, we focused on combining natural movement and acting with some more cartoony elements when looking at the animation style.” Those cartoony elements often came in by using 2D techniques. “We wanted the characters to feel energetic, lively and fun while also maintaining a solid sense of their weight (so some screen-shaking dino-stomps wouldn’t feel out of place). As a result, we often work in some smears, zips and pops between poses where we feel they would add to a moment or shot.”

Jurassic Jaunts: The new Nick show *Tim Rex in Space* charts the intergalactic adventures of a T-Rex named Tim, his big brother Tommy, little sister Tia and triceratops bestie Kai.

Patterson says the team worked in “an almost ‘2.5D’ style of animation,” which allowed some experimentation in each episode. The team also had to do some problem-solving for the more realistic elements or, as Patterson puts it, “the big-head-little-arms question that comes with working with dinosaurs.”

Dransfield adds, “In designing these characters that look quite flat, we don’t have a lot of turnaround angles of their heads. So when Tim, for instance, turns from facing one way to facing the other, there’s a bit of a snap because his head isn’t 3D, so we can’t show it rotating all the way around.”

This created a limitation because “Tim lives in a 3D world and he moves in 3D,” Dransfield says. He continues, “We can have characters move towards camera and move away from camera, and they move like 3D characters, but at their core, they are 2D, and I think the success of that approach is a testament to the achievements of both the character designers to begin with, and then also our incredible animation teams over at JAM in Belfast.”

The solutions, Patterson says, came from the designers at Mint as well as the rigging and animation teams at JAM Media. “[They] have consistently hit it out of the park in terms of what we can achieve with the character rigs, props and vehicles,” she says. “From lovely subtle expression changes and quiet moments of character acting to breakdancing robots and multi-rocket space races, the teams somehow manage to outdo themselves time and time again.”

The Right Amount of Surreal

Like the art direction, using the stylized animation carefully was also important. Having been a storyboarder on shows like *The Tom & Jerry Show*, Dransfield is a professed fan of golden age animation, but *Tim Rex* was an exercise in restraint. “I don’t think it’s always totally appropriate for preschool viewers,

who are brand new to cartoons, to kind of throw them in on the deep end of that kind of surrealism which that style of cartooning lends itself to,” Dransfield says, adding that the series would apply that cartoony visual language with a light touch. Dransfield also acknowledges the flipside of this, that it was also important to challenge the young audience, at least a little. “You shouldn’t be talking down to them. They are a more advanced audience than you might initially think,” the director says about managing the tone as well as the animation.



“The simplified, rounded shapes seen throughout both the character designs and environments helped us build a whimsical universe that feels both fresh and familiar.”

SERIES DESIGNER AND ART DIRECTOR JOSHUA HOGAN

But even with that need to turn the dial down a little, building a sense of wonder was still important. Dransfield points to an early piece of visual development, a map of Rumbleton. “We were pulling from children’s illustrations and classic kids’ books, which quite often have these kind of busy, detailed worlds — like the books from your childhood where you remember poring over those images for hours. And so that’s what we really tried to do with that map. That’s hopefully what the series achieves: where you see a little asteroid in the title sequence up in the corner and [think] perhaps the episode is going to be about whatever’s on that asteroid.” With its combination of space and the familiar touches of home life, *Tim Rex* aims to be a show that is universal in two senses of the word. ■

Tim Rex in Space airs on Nickelodeon Monday-Thursday at 9:30 a.m. and encores on Nick Jr. at 6:30 p.m. The show also airs on Nick channels internationally and on Milkshake! in the U.K.





L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* becomes a new Crunchyroll favorite with a Japanese series by the Answer Studio.



Return to Prince Edward Island

By Charles Solomon

Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* books have enjoyed a special place in the hearts of Japanese audiences for almost 75 years. The first translation was published in 1952 as *Akage no An*, or *Red-Haired Anne*, and it became an immediate hit and remains popular there. The heroine of Sosuke Natsukawa's recent novel *The Cat Who Saved the Library* is spurred into action when she discovers the library's copy of *Anne* has vanished.

Anne Shirley is an orphan who's sent by mistake from an asylum to Marilla and

features of the local landscape, makes comic mistakes and excels in school.

A Force of Nature

As much of traditional Japanese culture focuses on the beauties of nature through the changing seasons, Anne's love for the forests and streams of Canada resonates with Japanese readers. Many young Japanese women have also envied Anne's freedom to speak her mind and make her own choices about life.

The novel has been filmed many times, beginning with a now-lost 1919 feature starring Mary Miles Minter. It's also been

DVD/Blu-ray set of the feature is currently out of print, although viewers with region-free players can find it on eBay. Sullivan Animation also adapted the books into the 26-episode *Anne of Green Gables: The Animated Series* that aired on PBS in the U.S. and TVOKids in Canada (2001-2002).

Anne Shirley (2025), a new 24-episode adaptation directed by Hiroshi Kawamata, is currently being simulcast on NHK and Crunchyroll. The two versions — Takahata's and Kawamata's — offer insights not only into the differing approaches of the two directors but into the changes the Japanese animation industry has undergone in the last three decades.

Much of Takahata's work celebrates the natural beauty of Japan, and he offers a poetic vision of Anne's fantasies. As she renames a nearby pond "The Lake of Shining Waters" and imagines a cherry tree covered with white blossoms as a bride, Takahata fills the frame with flowers, surrounding the characters. The opening sequence features animation by Hayao Miyazaki of Anne driving a carriage that flies through blizzards of flower petals. (Miyazaki also did some layouts and backgrounds for the first episodes before leaving to direct *The Castle of Cagliostro*. The reasons for his departure are the subject of

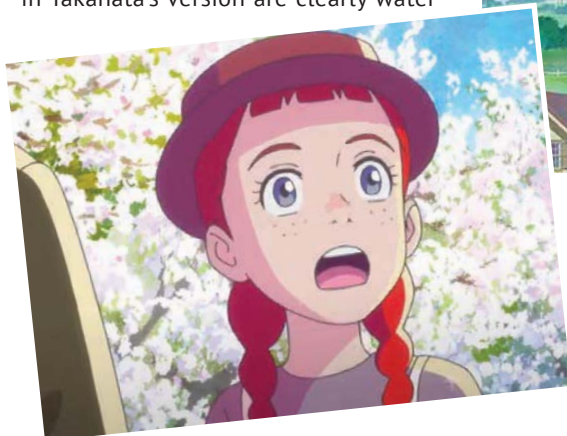
As Takahata and Kawamata demonstrate, Anne Shirley's singular blend of imagination and determination touches readers of all ages — whether they wish to tell off a meddlesome old woman or envision the inner life of a flowering tree.

Matthew Cuthbert, a brother and sister who own a small farm on Prince Edward Island, Canada. They had planned to adopt a boy to help with the chores but decide to keep Anne, despite some misgivings. They quickly discover she's a chatterbox with a vivid imagination. Anne describes her feelings in extravagant terms, gives romantic names to

animated several times, including two versions in Japan. *Anne of Green Gables* (1979), a 50-episode television series, was directed by Isao Takahata for Nippon Animation's *World Masterpiece Theater*. Takahata edited the first six episodes into a 100-minute theatrical feature in 1989, which was re-released in 2010. The series has been posted on YouTube; the

widespread discussions in online forums.)

Kawamata, whose previous work includes *Detective Conan: The Quarter of Silence* (2011), the 15th *Case Closed* feature, uses drawn and CG animation to present a more realistic vision of Anne's world. The backgrounds in Takahata's version are clearly water-



color paintings that suggest perspective; Kawamata's Prince Edward Island feels more three-dimensional.

Although Yoshifumi Kondō, the future director of the beloved *Whisper of the Heart* (1995), was the character designer on Takahata's series, the program was obviously made on a very limited budget. There are problems with the animation and cleanup. The appearance of the human characters sometimes shifts between scenes, and they often look disproportioned. The gentle Matthew Cuthbert has a blob of a mustache under his nose. In the intervening decades, Japanese artists have grown more skillful at animating humans. The characters in *Anne Shirley* are more crisply drawn; Matthew's features and anatomy are delineated more clearly and accurately, which fits Kawamata's more realistic vision of Anne's adventures.



In both versions, the title character poses problems for the artists. Some of Anne's speeches run several paragraphs, and much of the dialog in both series is taken directly from the book. Speechmakers are notoriously difficult to bring to life in animation. Famed Disney artist Marc Davis once said, "Maleficent just stood there and talked directly to the other characters. That's extremely difficult to bring across." He contrasted Maleficent with his next villainess, Cruella de Vil, who "was pitted against the other characters, eye to eye, mind to mind."

Speechmakers are notoriously difficult to bring to life in animation. Famed Disney artist Marc Davis once said, "Maleficent just stood there and talked directly to the other characters. That's extremely difficult to bring across." He contrasted Maleficent with his next villainess, Cruella de Vil, who "was pitted against the other characters, eye to eye, mind to mind."

Spunky Role Model

Takahata and Kawamata tackle the problem using imagery from Anne's visions and the reactions of the people around her to break up the declamatory passages. The Cuthberts learn to love Anne quickly and quietly: They're often amused by her ramblings. Their neighbors' reactions range from bewilderment to indignation. Early 20th century ideas of propriety have faded, and when Anne upbraids Marilla's smug friend Rachel Lynch for dismissing her as skinny,

Loved in Japan: Anne Shirley, the 2025 adaptation of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* is currently streaming on Crunchyroll.

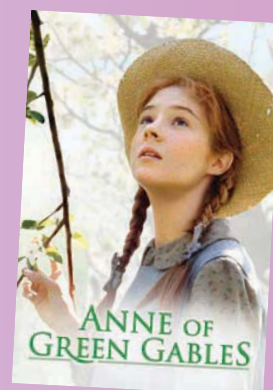
red-haired and ugly, the modern viewer sides with Anne. (Her later apology is a typical flight of overblown rhetoric.)

Despite major changes in juvenile literature, *Anne of Green Gables*, which was originally published in 1908, has endured along with other popular heroines such as Jo March (*Little Women*), Matilda Wormwood (*Matilda*), Pippi Longstocking, Nancy Drew and Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter* series) — all of whom are celebrated for their bravery, intelligence and strong personalities.

Anne's popularity seems destined to continue, both on the printed page and on the screen. As Takahata and Kawamata demonstrate, her singular blend of imagination and determination touches readers of all ages, whether they wish to tell off a meddlesome old woman or envision the inner life of a flowering tree. ■

Anne Shirley debuted in Japan on NHK in April. The series is currently available on Crunchyroll in the U.S.

Anne Through the Ages



L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* has inspired multiple animated and live-action series and movies, including (left to right), *Anne of Green Gables: The Animated Series* (2001, Sullivan Ent./PBS), *Akage no An* (1979, Nippon Animation/Fuji TV) and *Anne of Green Gables* (1985, CBC).



Back to Glorious Guadalajara

Mexico's Pixelatl Festival returns with a spotlight on the new wave of animation's visionary talent.

It's no secret that one of the best ways to get a taste of Latin America's vibrant animation scene is to check out the dynamic **Pixelatl Festival** in Guadalajara, Mexico. This year's edition, which takes place Sept. 9-13, promises to be another star-studded celebration of the art from and the region's up-and-coming animation talent. The festival's dynamic director and CEO, **José Inesta**, was kind enough to give us an early sneak peek of the 2025 edition:



Congrats on putting together another fantastic edition of Pixelatl, José. Can you tell us a bit about what we can expect to see at the 2025 edition?

José: I can tell you that it's going to be different. In addition to the regular animation executives that participate in every market, we are bringing successful content creators that work not only for the network, but directly through the audiences. We will have some success stories to learn, like the Ibermedia Next program, but we will also have high technical talks to help develop the skills of the audience.

What do you think makes Pixelatl different from other similar events around the world?

Pixelatl Festival is where Latin American imagination meets the world. We always have fresh content ideas and a lot of IPs are born at the event (*Frankelda*, *Rey Misterio*, *Villainous*, etc.). On top of that, we are more than a market, we are an event with a lot of heart that is changing the local ecosystem. We

can see collaboration between countries, the interest of foreign audiences in our stories.

What are some of the big highlights this year?

We will have the creator of *Ultra Duck*, **Edgar Delgado**, who will talk about the comic and the creation of the feature film. **Dana Terrace** will talk about her new show that will debut very soon, called *The Knights of Guinevere*. We will also have a lot of Latin American talent like **Mighty Animation**, the winners of the Emmy for Best International Kids Factual Show; also, the beautiful art of **Carolina Fuenmayor**; the stop-motion exhibitions of *Frankelda* from **Cinema Fantasma** and *My Grandfather's Demons* from **Sardinha em Lata**. We will also showcase *Mukira*, the new feature film (work in progress) from **Dinamitra Animación**, as well as a spotlight on *Huevocartoon* and other projects that are coming soon to theaters and to the home screens. Our program is full of screenings, workshops, masterclasses and exhibitions.

What is the biggest challenge facing you as you prepare the new edition of the festival?

The biggest challenge was to secure sponsorship from the studios. In the past, all the studios wanted to participate, showcase their upcoming content and promote their films or series. This year because of restructuring, mergers, law suits, debt and other particular issues, they could not support us. What they fail to realize is the importance of the Latin American audience, not only at the box office, but also in consumer products, merchandizing, etc. We are a community that is not represented at all on the screen, and they also don't support the artists that are entering the industry.

Any exciting new additions to the mix?

We will spotlight four new videogames that will be released next year. In addition, we will launch three comic books and one illustrated children's book. And of course, the participation of **Rudo** animation studio as our creative partner. The image, the spot,



everything they have created for the festival is amazing. We also have two **Ibermedia Next** panels, one that will talk about the importance of collaboration within Iberoamerica with several success stories and one that will show the importance of open source code for animation. We're also excited that **Uniko**, the studio behind *Unicorn Wars* and *Decorado*, will celebrate its 15th anniversary at the festival.

What is the most important part of preparing students for the tough job market out there?

The most important lesson is that they need to continue to pursue their dreams despite getting rejections from the industry. Being an artist is hard enough, but being Latin is even more challenging. We have very few showrunners and directors that are given opportunities to succeed, but that shouldn't make you give up. At Pixelatl, they can meet several showrunners that, against all odds, were able to create shows that are amazing and popular. Students need to continue pre-

paring themselves and keep showing their work on social platforms, because you never know who is looking at your work online. Finally, they need to learn about teamwork. Animation is an art that requires a lot of people, and they need to be good artists and great human beings to succeed in this industry.

What is the 2025 animation industry look like in Mexico?

good artists will be able to stand out more when everybody produces "normalized" content coming from AI. We lived through the revolution of distribution in the beginning of the century, but I believe we are entering the revolution of the creation process. The future is promising for artists and storytellers. At the end of the day, we need stories because they make us human.



executives that don't greenlight projects that are tested and have an audience. Even though the audience is content-savvy, new shows are not being produced and people are getting tired of sequels and spinoffs. On the other hand, we are seeing a lot of brands commissioning shows directly to advertise their products in very short form (less than three minutes) and in a vertical format so that you can watch them on your cellphone.

Final words: Best reasons to attend Pixelatl in 2025?

The people that come to our festival are filled with generosity and are willing to share their knowledge with the audience. On top of that, they are willing to collaborate with one another and inspire each other. Despite the lack of business in the industry, the thirst for original stories always inspires the international audience that comes to the event. It's a small market with a lot of heart, and

Pixelatl '25 Signal Film by Rudo Co.



growing thanks to initiatives like Ibermedia Next and co-production treaties between Latin America and Europe.

What are the biggest trends you have seen in the animation business during your travels this year?

The main trend we are seeing is quick and cheap animation overflowing the social platforms. There's a lot of nonsensical content that is looking to reach the audience quickly in order to change it to make the audience happy. We are also seeing a lot of fear from



people shouldn't miss it because it's only through collaboration and enriching each other's stories that we can create better shows that relate to audiences. ■

For more info, visit pixelatl.com.



DO I AMUSE YOU?

Ottawa Intl. Animation Festival's director offers us a sneak peek of the popular event in September.

By Chris Robinson

Well, the OIAF (Ottawa International Animation Festival) is entering the last year of its 40s and hurtling toward our big 50th anniversary in 2026 — but this 49th edition is no slouch!

For those who haven't attended before, OIAF is North America's largest and oldest animation event. It features competition screenings, retrospectives and special programs, industry panels and talks, exhibitions — and a boatload of parties. Whether you're a student, teacher, producer, filmmaker, art fan, content creator or just curious, there's something to suit every taste.

Why am I surprised that, in a moment when existence feels more precarious, more impossible and more hopeless than usual, the animation community is finally revealing its sense of humor? "Sense of humor," you ask, befuddled. *But these are cartoons! They should be funny.* Oh, you poor naive human. Cartoons (a.k.a animation) actually churn out more darkness and depravity (plus an unhealthy dose of cheese) than outright comedy. I know — it surprises me too, but it's true: Animated films are dominated by dramas. And it makes sense, really, because good comedy is far harder to craft than drama. Most of the jokes I see each year are derivative nods to industry hits that, frankly, weren't all that funny to begin with. Comedy — true comedy — emerges from darkness.



Kyiv Cake



The Girl Who Cried Pearls



Decorado



Poor Marciano

Some of this year's absurdist, darkly comic highlights include:

- *I Can't*, Renato Klieger Gennari, Brazil (about a problematic vacuum cleaner)
- *Poor Marciano*, Alex Rey, Spain (which references a one-hit Canadian band that I'd like to apologize for)
- *S the Wolf*, Sameh Alaa, France (an ode to hair loss)
- *A Taste of Beer*, Li Xie, China (an utterly bizarre father-son story)
- *Existential Greg*, Will Anderson, United Kingdom (a cat's crisis)
- *Basketball Explorer Presents: The Shot Doctor* (an extremely troubled basketball player)
- *I Beg Your Pardon*, John W. Lustig, United States (an idiot murderer)
- *Quota*, Job, Joris & Marieke, Netherlands (an explosive take on climate change)
- *The 12-Inch Pianist*, Lucas Ansel, United States (a genie wish goes awry)
- *Two Point Five Stars*, Sina Lerf, Dario Marti and Dario Boger (a rather bizarre hotel)

Not everything is a laugh, of course. Keep an eye out for potent new works like *Kyiv Cake*, *Bread Will Walk*, *Paradaiz* and *Off-Time*, among many others.

Judging these brief beauties will be Winston Hacking (Canada), Gina Kamentsky (U.S.A.) and Mariam Kandelaki (Georgia).

Over in the feature competition, there are six contenders:

- *Decorado*, Alberto Vázquez, Spain



"Cartoons actually churn out more darkness and depravity (plus an unhealthy dose of cheese) than outright comedy. Animated films are dominated by dramas, and it makes sense, really, because good comedy is far harder to craft than drama."

CHRIS ROBINSON, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF OIAF

- *Olivia and the Invisible Earthquake*, Irene Iborra Rizo; Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland
 - *The Great History of Western Philosophy*, Aria Covamonas (who tragically passed away this summer), Mexico
 - *Death Does Not Exist*, Félix Dufour-Laperrière, Canada
 - *Tales From the Magic Garden*, David Súkup, Patrik Pašš, Leon Vidmar and Jean-Claude Rozec; Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, France
- Feature jurors include Chris Lavis (Canada), Honami Yano (Japan) and



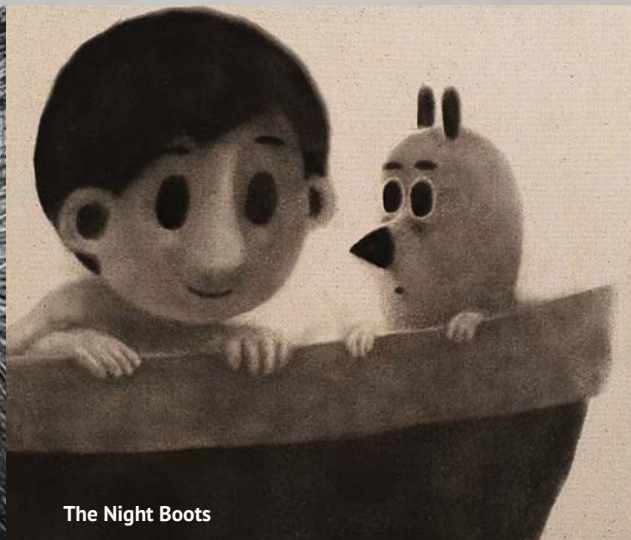
The Sound of Music



Tales from the Magic Garden



Existential Greg



The Night Boots



EMILY BRUNDIGE

Magdalena Zira (Cyprus).

There's also a bounty of films in our Kids (featuring Annecy Cristal winner *The Night Boots* by Pierre-Luc Granjon), Teens, Canadian Student and Series (*Common Side Effects*, *Eggland*) competitions.

We have made one minor change this year: You'll notice the absence of Panorama screenings. These out-of-competition selections once showcased films that we couldn't fit into competition but still wanted to present. We've decided to retire the World Panorama and World Student Panorama programs, though you can still catch some great titles in the Canadian Panorama screening.



KEVIN GILLIS

Special Screenings & Retrospectives

Phil Mulloy's biting minimalist satires — *Cowboys*, *The Sound of Music*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Intolerance*, *The Christies* and *Endgame* — have been on my mind for years. Phil was slated to attend the festival, but he sadly passed away this summer. It's a tremendous loss for the animation world, but thankfully his work lives on for us to explore. His voice is sorely missed in animation, so we're reintroducing his work with a three-part retrospective of his classic shorts and features, an exhibition of provocative and fiery art and the launch of the first book on his oeuvre, *Raw Outrage—The Films of Phil Mulloy*.

We're also spotlighting the Oscar-nominated Canadian stop-motion studio **Clyde Henry** (Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski), whose latest work, *The Girl Who Cried Pearls*, competes in the Short Competition. The duo will also lead a behind-the-scenes session on their unique process as part of **Animation Exposé** (see more below).

Other highlights include: A tribute to the work of American experimental animator and OIAF favorite **Gina Kamentsky**; Focus programs celebrating 95 years of Georgian animation and showcasing the new wave of Japanese animation; **Eternal Stories: Animating Ancient Greek Myths**, a one-off screening exploring classical mythology through animation; a screening of ***A Return to Memory***, Donald McWilliams' extraordinary documentary about the pioneering women filmmakers at the National Film Board of Canada; and **Touch Frames**, a specially curated screening by the team at **24 Memes Per Second**.

The Animation Conference (TAC)

Over on the more business-driven side of OIAF, The Animation Conference (TAC) is the three-day industry event for production executives, creators, broadcasters, streamers and more. (Programming was still being added or confirmed at press time.)

This year, TAC takes an optimistic look at new ways of getting projects made and doing business. **Switching Streams** breaks down how companies and independent creators are turning to alternative platforms for their central distribution strategy. **Animation on Location: The Business of Animation for 4D spaces** examines how animated projects can transform stores, rides and public places.



ERIC CALDERON

Want to improve your pitch? Newcomer **Emily Brundige** (*Goldie*, *Hilda*, *Pubertina*) and industry legend **Eric Calderon** (*Surviving Animation*) will help you shape your series concepts for the spotlight.

Meet your next new production partner at **Fast Track** and learn about co-production with France. Plus, regular favorites **Pitch THIS!** and the **Toon Boom Boat Cruise**.

Before Saturday night's award ceremony and annual party (Pique), you can get to know your favorite creators, shows and films at our Animation Exposé. Aside from the **Clyde Henry Q&A**, this year's highlights include hometown hero **Kevin Gillis**, creator of the beloved Canadian series *The Raccoons*, celebrating 40 years in the Evergreen Forest with a retrospective Artist Talk, signing and new merchandise.

Word on the street is that some big-name studios are lining up to crash both TAC and Animation Exposé — but if I say anything more now, I'll get in trouble. Best to keep checking the OIAF website for updates.

And finally, Americans: We know you're having a tough time, and we're not thrilled with your leader's threats and tariffs — among many, many other things — but you're still welcome. Just be careful: Don't be fooled by tales of our politeness. Mess with us, and we might just play you some Crash Test Dummies.

OIAF25 runs Sept. 24-28. You can find all the details at animationfestival.ca.



Your Animation & VFX Emmy Ballot

Family comedies and adult dramas compete for TV's top honor in September.

Five animated series and 10 VFX-driven shows were nominated to compete for this year's **2025 Primetime Emmy Awards**. CBS will air the 77th awards ceremony from the Peacock Theater in Los Angeles on September 14, hosted by Nate Bargatze. Here is your animation- & vfx-specific Emmy ballot! **For more info, visit [emmys.com](https://www.emmys.com).** ■

OUTSTANDING ANIMATED PROGRAM

- ☐ **Arcane.** "The Dirt Under Your Nails"
Netflix / A Riot Games and Fortiche production for Netflix
- ☐ **Bob's Burgers.** "They Slug Horses, Don't They?"
FOX / 20th Television Animation
- ☐ **Common Side Effects.** "Cliff's Edge"
Adult Swim / Green Street Pictures and Bandera Entertainment for Adult Swim
- ☐ **Love, Death + Robots.** "Spider Rose"
Netflix / Blur Studio for Netflix
- ☐ **The Simpsons.** "Bart's Birthday"
FOX / A Gracie Films production in assoc. with 20th TV Animation

OUTSTANDING CHARACTER VOICE-OVER PERFORMANCE

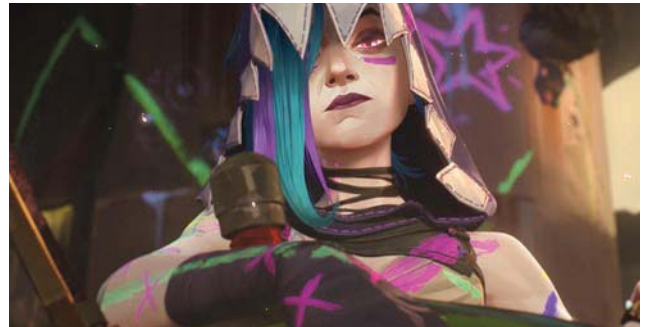
- ☐ **Julie Andrews** as Lady Whistledown
Bridgerton. "Into The Light" (Netflix)
- ☐ **Hank Azaria** as Moe Szyslak
The Simpsons. "Abe League of Their Moe" (FOX)
- ☐ **Maya Rudolph** as Connie the Hormone Monstress
Big Mouth. "Why Do We Go Through Puberty?" (Netflix)
- ☐ **Alan Tudyk** as K-2SO
Andor. "Who Else Knows?" (Disney+ / Lucasfilm)
- ☐ **Jeffrey Wright** as The Watcher
What If...? "What If...1872?" (Disney+ / Marvel Animation)
- ☐ **Steven Yeun** as Mark Grayson
Invincible. "What Have I Done?" (Prime Video / Amazon MGM Studios, Skybound Animation)

OUTSTANDING SPECIAL VFX IN A SEASON OR A MOVIE

- ☐ **Andor**
Disney +
- ☐ **Dune: Prophecy**
HBO Max
- ☐ **House of the Dragon**
HBO Max
- ☐ **The Last of Us**
HBO Max
- ☐ **The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power**
Prime Video

OUTSTANDING SPECIAL VFX IN A SEASON OR A MOVIE

- ☐ **Black Mirror.** "USS Callister: Into Infinity"
Netflix
- ☐ **The Penguin.** "Bliss"
HBO Max
- ☐ **The Residence.** "The Fall of the House of Usher"
Netflix
- ☐ **Severance.** "Hello, Ms. Cobel"
Apple TV+
- ☐ **The Umbrella Academy.** "End of the Beginning"
Netflix





Dynamic Dozen:

12 Hot Projects to Catch at Cartoon Forum 2025

The European animation community is getting ready to present 75 new TV series and specials at this year's Cartoon Forum event in Toulouse, France, (Sept. 15-18). As usual, France leads the selection with 30 shows, followed by 11 from the CEE countries (Poland [three], Czechia and Serbia [two each], Armenia, Bosnia, Bulgaria and Latvia [one each]), Ireland (seven),

Belgium and Spain (six each), Germany and Italy (three each), Greece and the Netherlands (two each). Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Portugal and Sweden will each present one project. Overall, shows from 27 countries are represented at this year's event. The good news is that about 43% of the selections are already in production. Here are a dozen projects that grabbed our interest before the show:



ANIMALIES

The Czech tradition of creating innovative and charming animated content for young viewers continues with *Animalies*, a colorful 2D show about six city-dwelling animal characters who attend a special summer camp. Written and directed by **Marek Náprstek** and **Katerina Karhankova**, the 26 x 13' show is produced by Prague-based **Bionaut** (*Rosa & Dara and Their Great Summer Adventure*, *Axolotls*). What makes *Animalies* special is that the stories depict the characters as regular stubborn preteens and not just as individuals with physical disabilities. Not to mention the likable character designs and eye-popping hues.

ANTÓN PIÑÓN

The hilarious blue lemming star of the new Spanish show *Antón Piñón* is definitely not going to jump off a cliff. Based on a popular book series, the 52 x 7' show follows the adventures of Anton, who lives with his wise and unpredictable grandma and his 27 chaotic siblings in a vibrant forest. Of course, he also has a few special friends – the playful Violeta, the athletic Modesto, the cautious Benito and the brave Beatriz – who are always ready for silly misadventures. A co-production between Spain's **Imagic TV** and **NHK Japan**, the show is supported by the Catalan Development Fund and Televisió de Catalunya. **Jordi B. Oliva** (*The Wavies*, *Josep*) and **Kazuhiro Iwami** are producing.



ELLE(S)

Talented French animation veterans **Anne de Galard** and **Eric Garnet** are best known for popular series such as *Simon*, *Zip Zip*, *Commander Clark* and *Monster Shaker*. This year, they are introducing a highly original new show that is quite different from their other projects: *ELLE(s)* is based on a popular graphic novel series by **Kid Toussaint** (and illustrated by **Aveline Stokart**), and it's described as a genre-bending thrill ride about a teen girl whose emotions split into living, breathing versions of herself. As these different versions of Elle battle for dominance, the show offers a clever spin on the familiar difficulties of adolescence. Perfect for today's fantasy-savvy tween audiences, *ELLE(s)* is presented by **Go-N Productions**, the company founded by Garnet and De Galard almost 21 years ago (and acquired by Federation in 2023). We can't wait to see this one come to animated life.



JAM & RE

How can you resist a colorful show centered on the fun adventures of a clever jester and his beloved lute? The new (52 x 7') preschool show *Jam & Re* is the brainchild of **Uri Lotan** and **Amit Russell Gicelter** (the head of Israel- and Greece-based studio **The Hive** and the producer of series such as *Summer Memories* and *The Fenestas* and the Oscar-nominated short *Letter to a Pig*. Daytime Emmy-winning writer **Kevin Del Aguila** (*Wonder Pets!*, *Peg+Cat*) is also attached to the charming project, as is co-producer **Maite Woköck** (Germany's **Telescope Animation**). Jam and Re spend their time entertaining King Staccato, the well-intentioned but often misguided ruler of their land, as well as getting wrapped up in adventures with sleepwalking dragons and mischievous sirens. No matter what, they always seem to be able to rely on their wits and talents to save the day. This is one musical, medieval world most preschoolers would enjoy visiting every day.

LOLA, PORCO & PACO

Spanish producer **Álvaro Pérez Becerra** (La Coruña-based **Undodez Productions**) comes to Cartoon Forum this year with an adult-targeted 12 x 8' show about three unlikely friends living in a remote village who are trying to make some sense out of our insane 21st century world. The series' main characters are Paco, a shy gas station clerk with no ambition beyond watching TV, playing games and going to parties; Lola, an eco-feminist who hates everything; and Porco, who is described as "a filthy, chaotic pig in every sense!" As the show description notes, "Their lives seem simple until digital overload turns their days into absurd adventures full of contradictions, conspiracies, activism and chaos." The show is written by **Andrés Mahía** and **Xosé Castro** and designed by **Laura Mahía**. We feel like we already know this trio, and we have a strange desire to tag along with them and enjoy their out-of-control storylines.



MEOW CLIQUE

This new project from the talented team at Poland's **Letko Studio** draws you in immediately with its easy-to-love 2D visuals. Based on the popular *Cat Gang* graphic novels by **Agata Romaniuk**, the 52 x 11' preschool show is directed by award-winning animation veterans **Marek Lachowicz** and **Piotr Szczepanowicz** (*Acid Rain*) and produced by **Jakub Karwowski** (*Odo*; *Kill It and Leave This Town*; *Jacob*, *Mimmi and the Talking Dogs*). **Maciej Chmiel** (**Studio Filmów Rysunkowych**) is co-producing this entertaining show about a group of clever cats who "claw their way through the town's most whisker-raising mysteries!" What kind of mysteries you might ask? Well, there's the case of the stolen herrings from the fishmonger, or the spooky sightings in the local theater, etc. The producers promise that with every clue, the feline teammates follow their instincts, their tails and their powerful sense of smell to track down the villains!



NATU NATU

There's always lots of buzz surrounding new projects from five-time Oscar-nominated Irish studio **Cartoon Saloon**. This month, the brilliant folks at the Kilkenny-based outfit are bringing their new animated preschool show to Cartoon Forum. A co-production between France's **Superprod** and Luxembourg's **Melusine Productions**, the promising 104 x 5' series is created by **Fran Bravo** (art director on *Puffin Rock* and *the New Friends and Silly Sundays*) and penned by **Cian McGarrigle** (*Silly Sundays*) and produced by **Jason Tammemagi** (*Star Wars: Visions*) and **Ailbhe McCabe** (*Eiru, Silly Sundays*). The show centers on two tiny helpers of nature, Natumi and Natuko, who love to play, explore and discover new things in the garden. Being green never looked cuter.

OH WOW!

Oliver, an imaginative four-year-old boy, and his friend Zelig, a tiny mouse who lives in his house, get into all kinds of mischief in the beautifully crafted new preschool series from **Claire Grimond** (*Maya the Bee*) and the team at France's **Autour de Minuit**, led by super-talented Oscar-winning producer **Nicolas Schmerkin** (*Logorama*), who is also behind another one of this year's acclaimed shorts, *Playing God*. We love the tactile feel of the show, which is both inviting and easy to fall for.

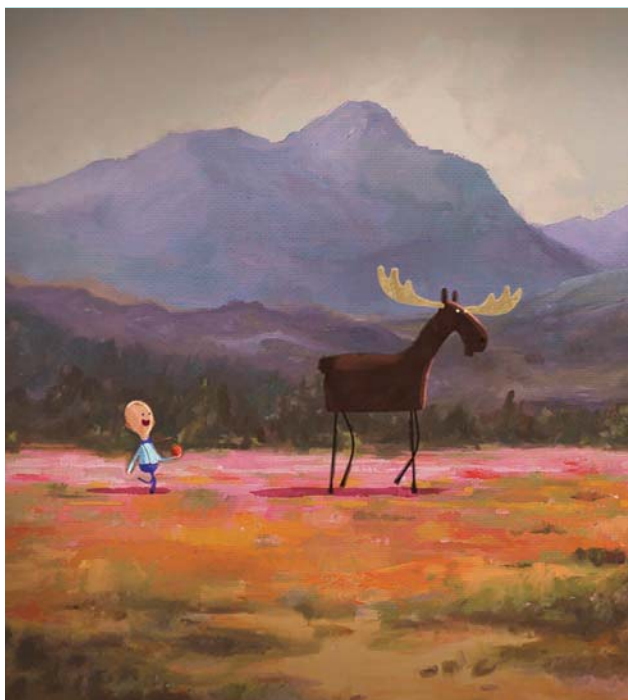


SUPERCAT IS A DOG

Cats and dogs will always have a special place in the world of animation. This year, the folks at France's **Les Armateurs** (*Kirikou* movies, *Ernest & Celestine*, *The Secret of Kells*), the studio founded by Didier Brunner, bring us a new show about the never-ending battle for dominance between the two species! Produced by **Reginald de Guillebon** (*The Swallows of Kabul*), the 52 x 11' series is aimed at kids ages six to 11 and follows the adventures of a clumsy hound named Doug who must stand in for the fearless Mac the Supercat after a terrible accident. Who will win control — the pussies or the pooches? I guess we'll have to wait until the show gets made and hits screens worldwide to find out!



To learn more about the 2025 edition of the event, visit cartoon-media.eu/forum.



THIS MOOSE BELONGS TO ME

Oliver Jeffers' beautiful books have inspired several award-winning projects, including *Here We Are: Notes for Living on Planet Earth* and *Lost and Found*. **Sixteen South** (Ireland) and **Creative Conspiracy** (Belgium) are now working on adapting another one of his creations, *The Moose Belongs to Me*. The 22-minute special centers on a friendship between a young boy and a moose he names Marcel, a story that turns a surprising corner when someone else claims the kind animal as their own. Adapted by **David McGrath** and **Gerrit Bekers** and produced by **Colin Williams** (*Claude, Odo, Coop Troop*), this beautiful special is definitely one worth waiting for.

UNDERGLOW

There's something about **Sam Morrison** and **Tanya J. Scott's** quirky, lovingly designed new 2D preschool show that draws you in immediately. The duo, who has worked on great projects such as *Hey Duggee*, *Shaun the Sheep*, *Robin Robin* and *Sarah & Duck*, introduces us to a magical world of discovery and play, anchored by Riley and Brewster and a colorful group of friends – including a floating fish and a talking potato! Created in partnership with the **BBC** and produced by Finland's prolific animation studio **Gigglebug Entertainment**, led by the talented **Anttu Harlin**, this is one show we'll gladly let any preschooler fall in love with.



WIZZOS

"Welcome to Wizzoville, a town of 302 inhabitants where 300 possess magical powers and two don't! Meet Hexley and Spellbert, wizards in training ... forever!" That's the funny intro to **Boulder Media's** appealing new show about two misfits who try to find missing pets in a magical world. Created by **Stephen McGann** and written by **Ciarán Morrison** and **Mick O'Hara**, the 52 x 11' 2D series is produced by the brilliant **Colm Tyrrell**, whose many credits include *Doc McStuffins*, *Vampirina* and *Eva the Owllet*. ■



UP, UP AND AWAY!

VFX pros Stephane Ceretti and Guy Williams share the secrets behind *Superman's* seamlessly crafted, iconic visuals.



By Trevor Hogg

There have been many incarnations of the Son of Krypton in television and movies, but director James Gunn's latest take on DC's *Superman* proved an instant hit with audiences worldwide.

Armed with his vision for the superhero, Gunn laid down the foundation for using CG effects strategically to achieve an epic scope, and reunited with *Guardians of the Galaxy* VFX supervisor Stephane Ceretti and the teams at Wētā FX, Framestore, ILM and Rodeo FX to create 1,730 visual effects shots. Unlike the dour tone established by Zack Snyder, Gunn opted to channel the hopefulness and idealism associated with the title character, but also to deal with the ramifications of those personality traits in a world that is far from utopian.

"Granted, Superman is going to be wearing

a cape and tights, can fly and has laser vision, but to some degree this felt like we were working on a new IP because James Gunn has a totally fresh take on comic-book movies in general," says Guy Williams, senior VFX supervisor at Wētā FX, who had to deal with everything from capes, a massive kaiju and a mathematical environment to a 2,000-frame one that features Raptors for a total of 586 shots.

"If you do visual effects well, you don't notice them," Williams tells *Animation Magazine*. "You notice the impact. In that regard, all movies strive to be the same. This one present[ed] numerous unique challenges because James went comic book with it. It's not just cars being flipped over and the occasional superhero punching somebody or flying. There's a kaiju, the Pocket Universe, the River Pi and a black hole. We had a lot more fantastical stuff to wrap our heads



around, and that creates way more work for us because it means a lot more visual problems that you have to solve."

Krypto the Superdog follows the CG creature footsteps of *Guardians of the Galaxy's* Rocket Raccoon. "A talking raccoon is a little less something you wake up to in the morning, so a dog is trickier," says Stephane Ceretti with a laugh. "While we were shooting *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, James adopted his dog, Ozu. We had to be careful in everything we're doing because he's gray, not white, as well as scraggly and bigger. We scanned Ozu in Los Angeles before we went to Atlanta to shoot *Superman*. James showed us videos from his iPhone of his dog chewing his shoes or going around in circles and doing crazy stuff."

Silent film star Buster Keaton was a great point of reference for the production. "Dogs have these eyes that are round, and you need

"Dogs have these eyes that are round, and you need to express everything with very few things ... We don't want him to be an animated character. Krypto needed to be profoundly a dog."

VFX SUPERVISOR STEPHANE CERETTI



to express everything with very few things,” Ceretti explains. “We don’t want him to be an animated character. Krypto needs to be profoundly a dog.”

Robot #4 (voiced by Alan Tudyk) is Superman’s other charming companion that resides in the Fortress of Solitude. “Alan spent a lot of time with the guys from Legacy Effects, who built real robots for us,” notes Ceretti. “During each take, we looked at every little thing he was doing, like twitchy head moves, because the robots have only one eye and a slit. The animators looked at what we had from the actual mechanical robot and the acting on set, then mixed the two together.”

A complex proton waterway in the Pocket Universe was another visual that was quite esoteric in nature. “The River Pi was described in the script as ‘math gone wild,’” recalls Williams. “You’re seeing formulas and equations flying past you in a sea of antimatter. We got some beautiful artwork from the art department that set us down a path, and then we worked for literally six months doing iteration after iteration, trying to find a look for it. We knew it was going to be a river, so you start with a fluid simulation; however, we didn’t want it to look like water. We were doing tricks like adding what we call jets and mushrooms. We would have these strong jets of water that could push extra water into the simulation to create these swells in the river. We also had mushrooms, which were like a vertical jet of water that bubbles up onto the surface and collapses; that gave it this interesting cauldron effect that didn’t feel like a river but felt energetic.”

Metropolis Revisited

Although the setting of the movie was inspired by New York City, there was also another major influence on the layout of Metropolis. “The rift is going to come from the river, go through where the bridge is and then it’s going to where the LuthorCorp building is located,” says Ceretti. “All of these things we had to hit because of the script, so we started laying out the city based off of story points. I didn’t want to do compositing for every shot. We had to create a 270-degree

view of Metropolis from the LuthorCorp building before we started to shoot. I wanted to use a translight outside and not have to deal with blue-screen with those reflective surfaces inside the set.”

Every good Superman project also needs an impressive Fortress of Solitude. As Ceretti explains, “[Production designer] Beth Mickle had done amazing concept [art] of that beautiful fortress with these crystals fanning out of the ground based off locations that we could shoot in. We went to Svalbard and shot as much as possible in camera. Because all of the crystals are refracting, and there’s so many of them, it turned out to be a heavy render.”

Mister Terrific’s battle with a pack of Raptors at the beachside Fort Kramer required a two-minute, 2,000-frame oner. “Even with all the rehearsals and planning, if you’re going to do two or three setups for each one of those pieces, there’s three different stitches,” notes Williams. “The reset time because of all the wirework, footprints and destruction is large. What that means is to get three shots, and each shot takes two days, which is slow compared to a typical day where James Gunn does anywhere from 12 to 20 setups.”

“The challenge is that you might shoot this part of the scene in the morning,” he adds.

“Then, when you are done with that part of the scene, the sun would be setting in a different direction. We had to replace all the environment so that the tent



Guy Williams

had the right light on the roof. The shadows of the people were coming forward instead of going the other direction. You can deal with some of those issues in grading and by making the plates feel the same average value as you go across the cut. But, if the shadows and the light direction swing badly, then

they have to be fixed.”

Hair Apparent

Besides the cape, the hair was another key consideration for shots of Superman flying. “David Corenswet would wear a bald cap a lot of times,” reveals Williams. “We could replace his hair and have it really fluttering along. It was [something learned] from a previous movie that James did where they had the actor on set, did up his hair and then hit him with a fan. It turned into this almost wet-dog look where the hair just streaked backwards.”

Progressive Field in Cleveland posed an interesting challenge for the team. “We couldn’t do anything to the grass, so when you see Superman, the Engineer or Mr. Terrific hitting the ground and plowing through the dirt, that’s all CG,” notes Ceretti, who says he is a huge fan of Richard Donner’s *Superman* movies and *Star Wars*. “These are the films that made want to do what I do. And to have James, who I have worked with for so long, take that on was somewhat unexpected and magical for me.” ■

Warner Bros.’ *Superman* opened in theaters on July 11, delivering a \$217-million opening weekend worldwide and making it one of the biggest *Superman* movie debuts of all time.





Tech Reviews

By Todd Sheridan Perry

Wacom's Cintiq 16, 24 & 24 Touch

This summer, Wacom introduced the latest additions to the Cintiq line: The Cintiq 16, 24 and 24 touch (which we'll be looking at today). The new models sit above the Cintiq One but below the Pro line, with the 24 touch inheriting the 10-finger, multi-touch gesture of its

user prefers a VESA arm mount. The fan-less design ensures quiet operation even during long sessions.

The surface is smooth and consistent – even crossing over the bezels – covered with an etched anti-glare glass that is bonded to the panel. This provides minimal parallax

Pro Pen 3 offers 8,192 levels of pressure, 60 degrees of tilt, and three programmable side-switches, which can be swapped for different button configurations – or no side buttons, if that's your jam. Its EMR-based design means battery-free operation and near-zero parallax.



The multi-finger touch allows for a lot of control – manipulating your artwork or bringing up your programmable radial menus. Plus, you have on-screen versions of modifier buttons, which have replaced what were traditionally physical buttons. I have to admit that I miss those buttons. In Wacom's effort to make the design and workflow more minimal, I feel this might have been a step too far. I still have the ability to connect the ExpressKey puck for my physical button needs – but we've lost the ability to attach it to a bezel – because there is very little bezel left. But this is a very minor nit to pick.

This new line of Cintiqs is a great mid-tier tablet solution

big brothers.

The active display surface area has increased while the overall size and weight have been reduced thanks to slimmer bezels – which is debatably a good or bad thing. The Cintiq 24 Touch measures a slim 21mm and weighs in at 11lbs. Its boxy profile pairs with an included adjustable stand that supports a 16-69 degree working angle. The stand can be removed if the

between the screen and the pen nib, and a satisfying, tactile tooth

The 23.8" 2.5K WQHD (2560 x 1440) resolution display delivers sharp detail at a roughly 0.205 mm pixel pitch. It covers 100% sRGB, supports roughly 99% DCI-P3, and has a contrast ratio of 1000:1. The response time of ~12ms ensures minimal lag when sketching.

Bundled with the 24 Touch, the Wacom

tablet for those who want something more robust than Wacom's One or Movink, but don't need the resolution or color fidelity of the Pro line. As always, the tablet comes with a cornucopia of drawing and art software to try out and play with. ■

Website: wacom.com

Price: Cintiq 16: \$499.95; Cintiq 24: \$1,299; Cintiq 24 Touch: \$1,499.95



Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist whose recent credits include *I'm a Virgo*, *For All Mankind* and *Black Panther*. He can be reached at todd@teaspoonvfx.com.

Software reviews were written after being tested on a Puget Workstation AMD Ryzen Threadripper PRO 7975WX 4.0GHz 32 Core 350W; 128GB DDR5-5600 RAM and NVIDIA RTX 6000 Ada Ge 48GB PCI-E. (pugetsystems.com)

V-Ray for Blender

Bhaos Group's V-Ray for Blender brings the power of a production-proven renderer to the open-source 3D community. While Blender users have long relied on Cycles and Eevee, V-Ray offers photorealistic quality, deep customization and a pipeline integration that rivals any high-end DCC.

The installation is smooth, providing access to V-Ray via the add-on, which connects to the V-Ray license server. Once activated, you get a dedicated menu, a panel of tools, some additional tabs and buttons in the viewport, as well as a dedicated node panel for building materials.

V-Ray integrates well into Blender's interface, adding a dedicated tab in the Render Properties panel. Most settings are accessible here, including image sampling, global illumination, denoising, and render elements. V-Ray materials use custom shader nodes in Blender's node editor — familiar but more complex than Cycles' streamlined PBR setup. But if you want to stick with the Cycles shaders, V-Ray supports them, so you don't need to rebuild the shader trees. Furthermore, you have access to the Chaos Cosmos Browser, which grants access to over 5000 materials, HDRIs, and 3D assets that can be easily imported and assigned to your shot.

The V-Ray progressively renders in the V-Ray Frame Buffer (VFB2) with post-processing controls like exposure, color balance, and Light Mix. For interactive lighting, a V-Ray option is



added to the viewport display modes enabling live rendering directly in the viewport.

This commercial plug-in's strength is in its image quality and flexibility. It supports both CPU and GPU rendering with RTX acceleration and delivers outstanding results in lighting, reflection, shadows and global illumination. You also get access to the full range of V-Ray lights, including mesh lights (which allows you to convert objects or collections into light sources) and IES lights. Chaos's denoising options — including NVIDIA and Intel AI

denoisers — aid in speeding up render time by removing the noise in renders, which would normally take much longer to resolve.

Key production features are present as well: Cryptomatte, Light Select, Multimatte, AOVs, and V-Ray Proxies. The Light Cache and Adaptive Lights systems help optimize performance in complex lighting scenarios, especially interiors or multi-light setups.

For studios using Blender alongside Maya or Houdini, V-Ray for Blender is a game-changer. With .vrscene import/export and consistent material/render outputs, it becomes easy to match looks across departments and DCCs. V-Ray's wide adoption in VFX and archviz pipelines means Blender can now slot into more professional workflows without compromise.

For Blender users who are unfamiliar with the V-Ray workflow, the learning curve may seem steep. Then again, the same could be said for V-Ray users who are unfamiliar with Blender's workflow (which I am one). Fortunately, Chaos provides excellent tutorials that will get you rendering in no time — regardless of which side of the fence you're starting from. ■



Website: chaos.com/vray

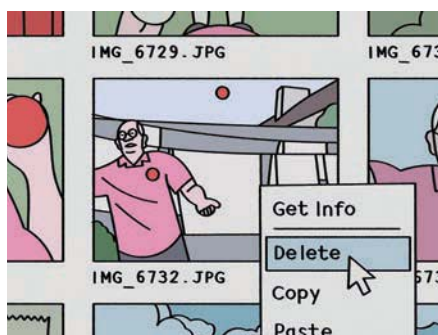
Price: Free 30-day trial offer;

\$33 per month; \$199 per year



Those Hilarious Final Years

How Irish director John Kelly came up with his Oscar-qualified crowd-pleaser, *Retirement Plan*.



Royal College of Art, says he loves how different people take different things the short. "The film is broadly about struggling with aging, so I was surprised to find it landing with people in their 20s, as well as those pushing 60!" he notes. "I think the stripped-back style allows people to project their own circumstances onto Ray a little."

Best Near-Death Experience Ever

Kelly says he hasn't quite experienced an audience like the first time it screened, at the Galway Film Fleadh in Ireland. "I suspect this could be down to a shared collective near-death experience: a fire broke out midway through the screening!" he recalls. "It was very dramatic — two fire trucks came and the

entire audience were evacuated. Then after an hour we all went back in and *Retirement Plan* was the last film to play, to a joyfully rowdy audience!"

When asked about his animation heroes, Kelly says he mainlined *Wallace & Gromit* shorts as a child; "However, I never seriously considered animation as a career though,

until I watched the early music videos and animations from Michel Gondry, Geoff McFetridge and Shynola."

Kelly adds, "Like a lot of people, I'm flummoxed how AI has been used to cruise control creativity instead of curing AIDS, say, or cancer. For me, much of what makes a final outcome special is a direct result of the process of making, at every stage. I do guiltily like how much easier it is to get answers for software problems though!"

As far as tips for future shorts makers, Kelly has this to offer: "I think lockdown knocked the paralysis out of me — I had made my own shorts, before but not for a long time. What I would say to my past-self 10 years ago is: 'Do it now, you ninny. First thought, best thought!' Start making things you want to see. Anything, any length. And more and more work will come if you pull on the thread." ■

For more info, visit retirementplanfilm.com.

By Ramin Zahed

"My midlife crisis is making a short about someone having a mid-life crisis!" says writer-director John Kelly, the hilarious man behind *Retirement Plan*, which won the Oscar-qualifying Best of the Fest award at the Palm Springs ShortFest and two awards at the SXSW Film Festival recently. "The initial idea hit me midway through a panic attack on an airplane. Then later on, I collaborated with my writer friend Tara Lawall to re-work it into a short film."

The result is a charming, funny and a touch bittersweet look at what we dream our retirement days will be like, cleverly contrasted with how they actually turn out to be! "In the short, Ray [the narrator] lists all the things he wants to do when he retires," says Kelly. "For sure, many of the things he mentions (such as 'driving one of those airport trucks' or 'I will learn what to do with a leek') are either a reflection or an exponential extrapolation of the various hopes, dreams and cataclysmic fears Tara and I have," admits Kelly. "Writing a film script is more affordable than therapy!"

The Dublin-based Kelly and his team of

about 20 got funding for the short back in August of 2023 and they finished it in nine months (the animation aspect took about three months). "I like figuring things out on the go, so I did storyboard, design and edit, and I was able to rope in two incredible animators, Marah Curran and Eamonn O'Neill, to breathe life into it. There are over 100 shots in the film and we worked remotely — so every day, sometimes a couple of times a day, I'd get a Slack ping with the most beautiful bit of animation. We already had Domhnall Gleeson's amazing narration to bounce off, as well as the beautiful music of John Carroll Kirby. This started out as a temp track, and I'm incredibly grateful he let us license it."

Kelly drew the layouts in Illustrator, and then Curran and O'Neill animated it using Moho. "The thing I'm most energized about after finishing this project is the pipeline — which may sound nerdy, but I think *Animation Magazine* is a safe space," he admits. "I like to make things quickly, and with our method the possibilities of longform feel excitingly within reach."

The filmmaker, who studied at London's



A DAY IN THE LIFE

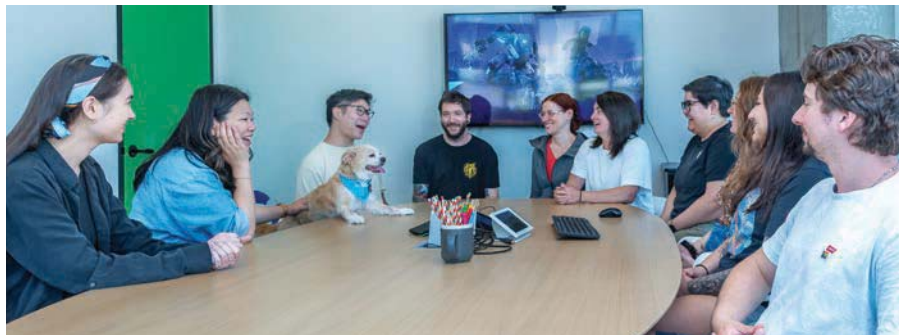
This month, we have the honor of taking a peek at a typical day in the life of Jake, the beloved studio pup at **WildBrain Studios** in Vancouver. The word on the street is that he's a true doggone star!



Snoopy Presents: A Summer Musical (Apple TV+, WildBrain, Peanuts Worldwide)



I always get a warm WildBrain welcome from Sara at reception!



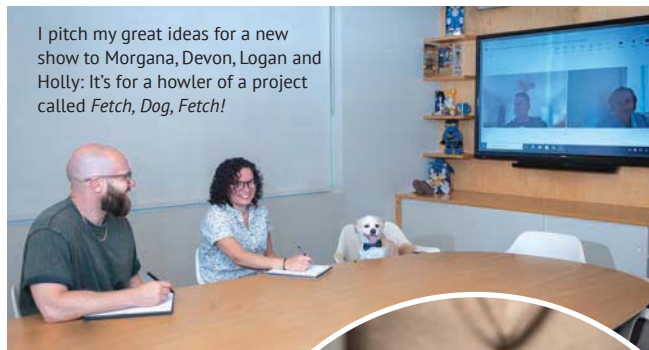
I enjoy leading my human Lillian and the *Ninjago* crew through my team check-in.



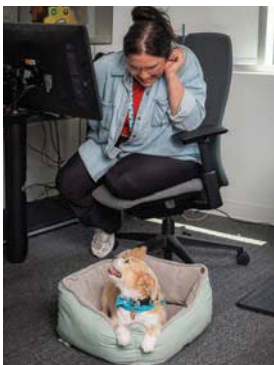
Being in the same building as legendary top dog Snoopy fills me with great pride.



Snoopy and the *Peanuts* gang get to have all the fun at the cafeteria.



I pitch my great ideas for a new show to Morgana, Devon, Logan and Holly: It's for a howler of a project called *Fetch, Dog, Fetch!*



I enjoy giving Alex my thoughts on the latest production schedule.



They always save the front row seat for me to review the latest cuts.



I'm dog tired after another work-hard, play-hard day at the studio! I'll be dreaming of squirrels tonight.



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